



5 gauges to measure the pace of your ministry



There are a variety of jobs in the world. Some are by nature less intense than others. I've had several friends that have worked as late-night security guards at various buildings or housing developments. Although their presence was important, they often related to me that the job itself was not particularly intense: they regularly spent time reading books, studying for exams, or otherwise filling their attention while on the clock.

My experience in full time ministry has been somewhat different. Not only is presence important, but the intensity is fairly high. I am rarely in a position of struggling to figure out how to fill my time simply to put in the required hours. More often, we face decisions about what to say no to, what to let go of, because there isn't enough time or energy to do everything that we could possibly invest ourselves in. There's no end to the relationships, the preparation, the communication, the meetings that we could involve ourselves with.

But how do we know when we're outpacing ourselves? How do we know if we're pushing ourselves too hard, for too long—overamping on our intensity in unhealthy and unsustainable ways?

Anglican minister James Lawrence presents this idea as “living in the red zone” (see Chapter 4 of his book *Growing Leaders*). He uses the analogy of the tachometer in a car: a measurement of the revolutions per minute as an indicator of how hard the engine is running. Every car has a uniquely calibrated red zone marked on the tachometer, which indicates a dangerous level of engine output. Sustained operation of the vehicle at or beyond this level will result in inefficiency and, ultimately, engine failure.

While we can push the car that hard on occasion, we would be wise to heed the warning of the red zone. Unfortunately, very few vehicles do much to draw attention to the red zone reality. Unless you're watching your gauges, attuned to how the vehicle is operating, you may suddenly find yourself stuck on the road somewhere—having burnt out all your vital mechanisms.

Lawrence identifies 5 gauges that we can take note of in our lives as indicators of whether we're prolonging a level of output that is in our personal red zone. He offers us the physical, emotional, relational, intellectual, and spiritual gauges. There are a number of red zone indicators for each gauge, but I'll highlight the most significant warning signs for me personally; perhaps you'll be able to relate.

Physical gauge: In addition to feeling perpetually weary, you may be operating in the red zone if you routinely get sick whenever you have a chance to take a vacation or get a bit of holiday. To my shame, this happened to me just last month, but thankfully my wife picked up on it and brought this reality to my attention.

Emotional gauge: Alongside of compassion fatigue and dispassionately engaging in ministry to hurting people, you may be operating in the red zone if your thoughts frequently turn to your "escape plan"—what it would look like to leave your current role and venture off into something new that feels like it would be more fulfilling or restful or exciting.

Relational gauge: It's not surprising that relationships will likely suffer if we're physically and emotionally spent. If you're regularly making promises to those closest to you that—next month, or once this project is over, or after we get through Christmas—everything will be better, then you may be perpetually living in the red zone.

Intellectual gauge: All of us likely have piles or shelves full of unread books; time management strains and intellectual fatigue may ensure they remain that way. But a profound indicator of operating in the red zone is whether we default to parroting old arguments and responses to challenging questions and situations, rather than investing in revisiting and reevaluating our perspective by engaging with new thoughts and ideas, especially those expressed by people from outside of our generation or culture.

Spiritual gauge: The letter to the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2) rebukes the church for losing its first love. When our passion for God slips, when we abandon spiritual disciplines, we should take note. But even more so, you may be living in the red zone when your prayers become reduced to nothing but cries for help in desperation—devoid of any adoration or delight—and your worship is nothing other than thanksgiving—only thinking of God in terms of what He has done, rather than who He is. When our prayer and worship becomes simply "please and thank you" our red zone living may be skewing our view of God away from being a Person, a loving Father, and into nothing more than a survival mechanism, a way to facilitate our accomplishment of our overwhelming workload.

So how about it? How do your gauges read at the moment? Are you operating in the red zone? Periodic output at this level is understandable; but if the red zone characterizes your lifestyle, burnout and breakdown are sure to follow.

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