

Ego: Healthy and Unhealthy Possibilities?

By Bob Young

Authors David Marcum and Steven Smith raise an interesting question in the subtitle of their book: What makes ego our greatest asset or most expensive liability? (*Egonomics*, Fireside, 2007). Because the authors are business consultants and are interested in applications, they do not address the psychological aspects of ego. The fact that we human beings have ego is neither positive nor negative. The difference is in how we manage our ego. Ego and healthy self-esteem are closely connected, and are at times used almost synonymously in the book.

Ego, balanced by humility, allows us to use our talents, meet challenges, and dream new dreams. Healthy ego says we are up to the task and can do what needs to be done. As such, ego is an asset which contributes confidence, healthy assertiveness, and the willingness to listen to others. (I can only listen to others and engage in healthy discussion and debate if my own ego or self-image is healthy enough that the process is non-threatening.) Ego makes possible healthy competition and excellence. The negative connotations of the word derive from ego out of control or misdirected. Persons with an unhealthy ego or ego problems often operate with a high level of defensiveness and are oversensitive to the ideas and suggestions of others.

This article surveys the four early warning signs of ego problems as outlined by the authors and then suggests applications for Christians, church leaders and ministers, and churches.

The four early warning signs of mismanaged ego seek to help us understand why ego gets the best of us at times. **First**, an unbalanced ego makes healthy competition impossible. Ego out of control always has to win, be first, be best, have the last word, have the best idea. Unhealthy egos which lead to unhealthy competitiveness may result in the rejection of excellent ideas and best practices. This principle has applications in everyday life, in ministry and leadership dynamics for the church, and in the church's life and self-image.

Second, unhealthy ego demands favorable comparisons. Self-worth or self-esteem is generated by identifying the "losers" or those "below" us. Such attitudes make it difficult for a person to function as part of a team where team members each contribute to the synergy of the group with no need for comparisons. Teams in which a certain team member seeks to determine which team member is most important or which team member's ideas are most often adopted generally struggle to function.

Third, ego problems are visible in a high need for acceptance. The felt need for acceptance is normal, but a person with an unhealthy ego demands continual, unconditional acceptance, not only of the person, but also of the person's thoughts, ideas, and unacceptable actions. The nature of this problem is seen in such phrases as "you don't love me anymore."

Finally, unhealthy of mismanaged ego is seen in what the authors call showcasing, that is, at attitude that constantly says "look at me". While appreciation and appropriate accolades are wonderful in healthy doses, an attitude that requires the constant attention and notice of others often suggests unhealthy ego or self-esteem issues.

Think with me about some applications of these concepts in three areas of interest in the life of the church: Christians in general, church leadership, and church health.

Applications for Christians

What happens when a Christian is competitive? Church becomes a competition! Who is the best song leader? Who is the best announcer? Who is the best Christian? Who understands the Bible best? Such attitudes not only destroy relationships, they often feed a legalism which approaches the Bible to find measurements more than transformation. Paul warns against comparing ourselves to ourselves. Christians who live with self-doubt and low self-esteem often seek acceptance at church. Often these are the EGRs—extra grace required folks. The Christian community is a wonderful place to find appreciation and acceptance, but in a healthy church, such acceptance is based on shared faith and goals more than personal abilities and contributions. When one listens to Jesus, it seems that church is not a place to find ego but rather a place to lose ego, finding the capacity to get to the top by going to the bottom, serving from weakness rather than strength, seeking the wellbeing of others above self. The greatest are the least and the least are the greatest. Competition, comparisons, high acceptance needs, and appreciation seeking are basically incompatible with such the view of life which characterizes the Christian community.

Applications for ministers and church leaders

What we observed about Christians also applies to those serve in the church in various roles of ministry and leadership. If anything, the challenges are magnified because of the high visibility of church leaders. When competitiveness and comparisons enter the board room or the staff meetings, team cohesion is usually destroyed. I have observed through the years that many ministers suffer from low self-esteem. I have wondered if the ministry attracts individuals with low self-esteem, promising an increased appreciation and acceptance by others. I have worked with some wonderful church leaders—I have also seen a few church leaders whose lives were controlled (or out of control!) by esteem issues. Church leaders and ministers will do well to pay special attention to the challenge of maintaining a healthy ego, a healthy sense of self.

Applications for churches

Churches can also suffer from low self-esteem. Esteem issues compromise church health. Churches can become overly concerned because they are not keeping up with the church next door or the church across town. Most churches have few sources of accolades—acceptance and appreciation—other than members and visitors. When members suffer from self-questioning, a major source of encouragement for the local church dries up. In making unhealthy comparisons, churches may become overly competitive. This is especially visible in the competition for transfer members—why did that new family that moved into town go to the other church? Churches may hunger for acceptance so much that they cave in to the culture around in the name of church growth. Churches are susceptible to the temptation to subtly (or not so subtly) declare: Look at us!

Undoubtedly, you can add to these short observations about healthy ego and applications in the context of the church. May God bless us as we seek ego balance—not to think of ourselves too highly; and yet to appreciate our creation in the image of God.