



DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT:

WHAT IS IT? HOW IS IT IMPACTING YOUR CHURCH LEADERSHIP?

BY RICH BIRCH



In 1999, Psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger presented a landmark study that identified an important cognitive bias, which has subsequently been named the Dunning-Kruger Effect. Simply put, what they proved is that this **effect causes people to overestimate their knowledge or ability, particularly in areas where they have little or no experience.** [\[ref\]](#)

In psychology, the term “cognitive bias” refers to beliefs that many of us have, without realizing that we have them. Cognitive biases are like blind spots. They’re built into our thought patterns and if we don't identify them and intentionally think about our thinking, they end up impacting the way we live and lead.

The Dunning-Kruger effect is alive and well and we can see it all over the place and in churches. Here are some examples of when the Dunning-Kruger effect is at play within your church:

- When the senior pastor gets worked up about the latest trend and pulls the kids' ministry team in to tell them how they must move forward. All the while, the kids' ministry team are aware of the latest trends. Here, the senior pastor flexes power and for various reasons, this simply doesn't work.
- When the youth pastor gives glib parenting advice to parents, thinking they know a lot after studying at bible college for one and a half years.
- It's when the executive pastor continuously questions why the worship team members need to drink so much coffee when they meet! ;)

In these examples, one person applies expertise from their area to an area that they do not have sufficient experience in.

Can you see it now? Essentially, the Dunning-Kruger effect explains a bias we have in our thoughts. We are unaware of how badly we grasp a new subject. We're oblivious to the fact that we are failing at it. We mistakenly think that we are doing as well as "average" or even "above average". **People who know precious little about a subject think that they know more than they actually do.**

You might see this in your personal life. For example, are you always running five minutes late for meetings? This could be the Dunning-Kruger effect at work in your life because you overestimate your ability to organize your day in such a way that enables you to be on time. Or we see it in the lives of politicians when they make declarative statements about things they know nothing about. In fact, it seems like there's an entire cottage industry of politicians living in that way!

One of the difficulties with the Dunning-Kruger effect is that it's so easy to see in other people but it's incredibly difficult to see it at work in our own lives. **We have great clarity when leaders and others around us are out over their skis and talking about something that they simply don't have any experience in or knowledge of.**

It can be "fun" to reflect on your own leadership and identify times when the Dunning-Kruger effect was in place. **It's a humbling experience for sure!** There are several instances I can look back on and see where the effect was at work within my leadership.

Early in my ministry, I remember watching people who spoke publicly, teaching pastors and lead pastors, and I thought, "Wow, that seems fun! I could do that." In my first decade of ministry, I had multiple opportunities to speak at [The Meeting House](#), where [Bruxy Cavey](#) is the lead pastor. Bruxy is an incredible communicator, one of the best in North America, and I thought that what he does wouldn't be too hard to replicate. Well, was I schooled! I realized that connecting with an audience is incredibly tricky. Finding a content connection that is both biblically sound and draws people in is difficult to achieve!

One of the unique things about The Meeting House is to this day, they have an open forum Q&A session at the end of every talk, which Bruxy makes look super easy. He has done this for decades. I still remember the first Sunday that I opened my session up for Q&A and all I will say is that humility and respect washed over me.

Ever since, I've championed teaching pastors and continuously try and find a way for them to have more space for creating and planning what they do.

Potentially, The Dunning-Kruger Effect may harm your church because we could make uninformed decisions, which may result in damaging our church. **Dunning-Kruger leads to church leaders making unwise decisions and potentially pointing their church in a harmful direction.**

I encourage you to read more about this cognitive bias and understand how it may be impacting your leadership team. I think you'll start to see its presence as you learn more about it. There are many ways that our biases impact the way we serve. But here are a few ways that you could fight against The Dunning-Kruger Effect:

5 WAYS TO OVERCOME THE DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT IN YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

- **Model Questioning Yourself //** When was the last time you verbalized to your team that you weren't entirely sure about a new area that you were venturing into? Rather than projecting machismo and trying to convince those around you that you know best, slow down and model that you still have questions. Let your team know that there are areas you need to learn about before you step into something new. Cultivate your ability to identify the areas that are outside of your expertise and verbalize to your team that you need to explore the new area before stepping into it. Learn what you're best at and lead from that spot.
- **Strategic Outsiders //** At a more macro level, as your church is looking to take a step in a new direction, your instinct should be to [engage with strategic outsiders](#). This may be a consultant; someone whose profession is to help churches like yours in a particular area. It could also be an informal gathering of half a dozen other church leaders who you know have been through the transition that you're about to go through and ask them for lessons. Cultivate the curiosity within you and keep explore the topic deeply. As you get in behind the leadership of the largest and fastest-growing churches in the country, you realize that they [are consistently using strategic outsiders](#) to help them make wise decisions as they step into the future.
- **Regular Performance Feedback //** Giving your team members consistent feedback around their performance is an important factor in reducing Dunning-Kruger's impact on your church. Please don't reserve giving feedback to your team only for when things have gone horribly wrong. The best practice would be to find a way to give both positive and negative feedback weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annually. For weekly feedback, you could use a tool like [15Five](#). You could use a tool like [Leadr](#) for your one-on-one conversations, but the most important point here is to give consistent feedback to your team, to help them understand those areas that they need to improve in. Even a little bit of consistent feedback will reduce Dunning-Kruger's impact on your leadership.

- **Default to Trusting Your Team //** Can we have an honest conversation for a minute? When you think about the work that your team's doing, do you naturally default to trusting them or do you find it difficult to give things up, to let it go, and to have them lead? As leaders, our default setting needs to be asking questions rather than answering them. Think about the last 10 conversations you had with your team. Did you position yourself as a question-answerer or the question-asker? Position your leadership coming from a place of humility and give up the reins to your team. Allow your team to lead, make mistakes, and hopefully find the areas where Dunning-Kruger impacts them. This should result in them realizing the need to seek input from others.
- **Think About Thinking //** Finally, an important skill for all leaders is to develop our metacognition. This is just a fancy word for saying that we need to think about how we think regularly. We need to process what's happening on the inside. This can happen through counselling, being challenged by external ideas, reading, and listening to interviews. Even just spending some time journaling can help you! Metacognition is an important skill for us to cultivate as we attempt to lead in a thoughtful way. It will push our church forward. Thinking about thinking helps us resist Dunning-Kruger's impact in our lives and we may find a way to cultivate it into our leadership.

Leaders who will win the future are curious and humble. Cultivating those two “superpowers” will help you lead at a higher level as we move forward.

LOOKING FOR MORE HELP WITH THE DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT IN YOUR LEADERSHIP?

I recently finished reading Adam Grant's book [“Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know”](#) and this book gives all kinds of vivid examples of The Dunning-Kruger Effect and how organizations have overcome it.

It would be well worth your investment to either read or [listen to this book](#) and process it with your leadership team. It's an accessible book that will help your wrestle through how we need to reinvent everything we do in ministry.

It seems like we're living in an age where all our ministries and organizations need to think again about what we do and how we do it, especially as we continue to step through COVID-19. **This book is incredibly timely as Grant provides not only great anecdotes but lots of meta-analyses** that helps us think about thinking.