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## *LEADERSHIP REFLECTION:* EXCELLENCE IN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

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This article neither describes detailed research nor offers practical advice for leadership procedures. Its intent is to emphasize the process and conditions that afford the best hope of achieving excellence in ministry leadership. Some may find it too theoretical, but as a famous educator once said, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory." Lurking in these paragraphs is the less than disguised notion that too many Christian leaders have made insufficient effort to rise above the level of mediocrity in churches, schools, missions, and other ministry categories. Several of the concepts appear in my book, *Coaching Ministry Teams*, first published by Word in 2000 and released again by Wipf and Stock.

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A few years ago, a major news magazine conducted a survey among people it considered "distinguished Americans," asking them to rate thirty institutions according to their effect on decisions influencing the nation. On that list, ranked highest to lowest, positions twenty-four, twenty-five, and twenty-six were occupied by education, family, and church. In these days when everyone speaks about the culture wars and post-modernity, it may be worth reminding ourselves that what we celebrate as Christians is not our social or political impact on North American or global society. We celebrate what God has done through his pilgrims and strangers who have always had a relatively insignificant impact on the wider culture of the secular world.

Yet that impact, however small and inconsequential by the world's standards, must be carried out at a level of excellence that brings glory to God. Ministries that center in the absolute truth of the Bible become what today's leadership literature calls

*learning organizations.* Let's never forget that our commitment to absolute truth forms the major distinction between Christian thinking and secular thinking.

## I. COMMITMENTS TO EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

I once read about a physicians' banquet in which the guest speaker was scheduled to address the topic "Emergency Medicine." One of the guests choked on a piece of food during dinner and died because not one doctor in the room could correctly administer the Heimlich maneuver. The story seems a bit far-fetched, but the point should grab each of us. Competence to serve in ministry must characterize all Christian leaders. What are these commitments?

### *Integrated Thinking*

Christian leaders hold a mandate to bring people to maturity, to spiritual adulthood, to a place at which they are no longer tossed about nor indecisive about the foundations of their faith.<sup>1</sup> We must determine what Christian maturity looks like, and how and where integrated thinking skills fit into that maturity. We teach people to think through what makes ministry effective. We challenge people to design better programs, more efficient organization, and improved ministries that will attract others in new and more dynamic ways. To do that we tap into creative thinking, throwing out old boundaries and approaching our challenges from a fresh perspective, asking questions that penetrate to the root of our mission and give impetus for an expanded vision.

### *Public Reputation*

In 1 Timothy 3:2-12, Paul identifies numerous qualifications for church elders and deacons. These lists reveal the fact that we should not take lightly the business of serving the Lord. Serving as a Christian leader carries both deep responsibility and enormous challenge. Church leaders, Paul insisted, must have a reputation of integrity with the world, with those in the church whom they would lead, and with God himself. Quality ministry must be carried out by quality people known in the church and the community as true followers of the Lord.

### *Cooperative Service*

When Christian leaders push teamwork, they do not necessarily buy into a secular business concept; rather, they affirm a basic biblical truth. Romans 12:5 reminds us that believers are united in Christ, "So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Why then do we applaud the lone ranger who builds a large church on the strength of his own personality? Why do we repeatedly affirm Christian superstars and ignore the millions who live out their faith day by day? Why do we accentuate competition among our students rather than urging

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<sup>1</sup> Eph. 4:13-15 (NIV).

cooperation and teamwork? When Christians learn to help each other, to make up for their own weaknesses with another's strength, they reflect the unity Christ desires of us.

### *Courageous Experimentation*

We all know failure breeds success, since we learn so much from creative mistakes. Our ministries ought to build an environment that frees people to discover new approaches to serving God and new solutions to constantly changing problems. When we work at cross-purposes, it drains incentive for fresh ideas. Such a climate promotes lack of solidarity, rather than global or holistic thinking, and can quickly degenerate into turf protection.

Quality control in Christian leadership remains an unreachable goal without wide-angle thinking. Edward Deming repeatedly emphasizes the need to have the "big picture" in mind. He reminds us that "the only way to change or improve an organization is to view it as a whole and implement changes throughout the entire system."<sup>2</sup>

## II. CHECKLIST FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

I'm told that on any given day, 4,855 AAA members are locked out of their cars. AAA receives 1,783,000 calls annually and reminds its members to remove their keys when they exit and keep one in a billfold or purse. Good idea. Our grandparents taught us that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Let's apply that to protecting the quality of Christian leadership. Leaving facilities in disrepair because no one notices or understands the concept of excellence may represent the worst scenario. But only slightly less desirable is a leadership style that constantly practices crisis management, dealing with broken programs and broken people after the fact. How can we build in safeguards up front?

### *Clear Mission*

The importance of an organization's mission cannot be overemphasized. As stated earlier, mission represents the purpose of a ministry, and vision is a picture of its future. A third component—values—describes how we intend to behave as we carry out the mission and pursue the vision. But there's a catch here, and Peter Senge describes it well:

There is a big difference between having a mission statement and being truly mission-based. To be truly mission-based means that key decisions can be referred to the mission—our reason for being. It means that people can and should object to management edicts that they do not see as connected to the mission. It means that thinking about and continually clarifying the mission is everybody's job. . . . In most organizations no one would dream of challenging a management decision on the grounds that it does not serve the mission. In other words, most organizations serve those in power rather than a mission.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Richard I. Miller, ed., *Applying the Deming Method to Higher Education for More Effective Human Resource Management* (Washington: CUPA, 1991), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Peter M. Senge, "The Practice of Innovation," *Leader to Leader* (Summer 1998): 17-18.

### *Competent Management*

Though leadership and management are distinct, in Christian ministry we can hardly separate the two. Good coaches do not tell players what to do and then punish them if they don't do it; they coach. Coaching consists of helping people do a better job and learning by experience how to increase ministry quality. And part of effective coaching is recognizing and thanking team members who do well.

In their workbook, *The Leadership Challenge Planner*, Kouzes and Posner once again beat the now familiar drum for positive re-enforcement:

"The climb to the top is arduous and long. People become exhausted, frustrated and disenchanted. They're often tempted to give up. **LEADERS ENCOURAGE THE HEART** so that their constituents carry on. If people observe a charlatan making noisy pretenses, they turn away. But seeing genuine acts of caring uplifts the spirit and draws people forward."<sup>4</sup>

### *Cooperative Attitude*

Deming urges us to drive out fear and to break down barriers between staff areas. This is good advice for any leader. Too many team members are afraid to ask questions or seek help even when they do not understand how their organization works. The result is that people continue to do things ineffectively or do not do them at all. To perform with quality, people need to feel secure in their work.

Too often, boards and staffs compete between or among themselves, depleting precious resources. When one segment of a leadership team causes problems for another, we can almost feel excellence diminishing. I recall something Daisy Hepburn said in her book *Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way*, "Good, better, best, never let it rest—until your good is better and your better is your best!"<sup>5</sup>

### *Constant Improvement*

In secular organizations, the phrase "constant improvement" refers to product enhancement or tweaking the techniques of marketing. In a ministry it more likely centers on what some would call "small wins," incremental steps toward higher quality in our educational programs. According to David and Mark Nadler:

Organizational learning doesn't just happen—top leadership has to make it happen. There are informal ways to support learning that involves the way leaders treat risk-takers who don't always succeed, but learning can also be formalized. . . . The object isn't to criticize or lay blame; instead, senior executives—sometimes the CEO—make it clear from the outset that their only

<sup>4</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge Planner* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass/Pfeiffer, 1999), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Daisy Hepburn, *Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way!: A New Look at Servant-Leadership Roles for Women* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992).

objective is to learn from experience, so lessons can be applied appropriately throughout the company.<sup>6</sup>

### *Correct Targets*

Focusing on correct targets offers a desperately needed corrective for many ministries—*eliminate [or minimize] numerical quotas*. Deming talks about an airline reservations clerk under a directive to answer twenty-five calls an hour, while being courteous and not rushing callers. “Sometimes the computer is slow in providing information. Sometimes it is entirely unresponsive and she must resort to directories and guides. Yet there is no leeway in the twenty-five-call mandate. What is her job? To take twenty-five calls or to satisfy the customer? She cannot do both.”<sup>7</sup>

Too many ministries operate with “total quantity management.” We number everything from enrollment or attendance to the dollars pledged at the annual advancement banquet. Then we measure success by rising numbers. Yet the biblical “bottom line” has very little to do with numbers of any kind—it deals rather with the quality of living and loving displayed in our schools and churches which make them attractive to present and potential families.

### III. Components of Excellence in Educational Leadership

Leonardo da Vinci once worked for a long period of time on a great masterpiece. He had labored long to create this work of art and it was near completion. Standing near him was a young student who spent much of his time with his mouth open, amazed at the master with the brush. Just before finishing the painting, da Vinci turned to the young student, gave him the brush and said, “Now, you finish it.” The student protested and backed away but da Vinci said, “Will not what I have done inspire you to do your best?”

Every Christian leader must be a model in speech, life, love, faith, and purity. Some have suggested that Timothy had a non-assertive personality, and they have criticized his leadership style. Even if that were true of Timothy, we should never confuse meekness with weakness, especially in serving the Lord.

### *Quality Control in Staff Recruitment*

Just as a good basketball coach knows how to get his team ready for action, so a good leader knows how to prepare team members for their tasks. Several issues are important here as we strive for excellence:

We must always *field the best team*. One year I played the sixth-man position on a basketball team. When a game started I had no idea how soon I would break into the lineup or what I would be asked to do. But I knew the coach wanted the best team on the floor at any given moment in the game, and he made sure we knew our purpose as

<sup>6</sup> David A. Nadler and Mark B. Nadler, “The Success Syndrome,” *Leader to Leader* (Winter 1998): 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Walton, *The Deming Management Method* (New York: Perigree, 1986), 78-79.

a group. He trained us to play our positions, he showed us how to be serious at practice, and he gave us resources for solving problems on the floor.

We must *know our personnel*. You can't field the best team unless you know the skills of the players. Sometimes coaches have to play people without wide experience. Maybe an injury forces the use of a player who needed a few more weeks of seasoning in practice. But that's all part of coaching. And when those times come, coaches not only make important decisions, they also teach players how to make good decisions.

We must *call the plays*. Very rarely in basketball is play-calling done on the floor. Sometimes a point guard will initiate a play, but more likely he gets signals from the coach and passes the play to his team members while bringing the ball down the floor. But those hand signals are useless if players on the floor don't understand the play. Communication permeates every aspect of coaching. H.B. London, Jr., reminds us of the need for good communication in working with our leadership teams.

Most leaders have little problem speaking, but severe limitations when it comes to listening. A majority of the problems we face occur because we usually communicate on a 'me' level. Sometimes we fall victim to conflict because we do not have a common vocabulary: We do not know how to describe what we are seeing and feeling without initiating an argument.<sup>8</sup>

We must *follow the game plan*. How often we hear sports announcers say, "No matter what the defense does, the coach is going to stick with his game plan." To be sure, if you're down twenty points with less than two minutes to go, it may be time to change the game plan and try a few drastic measures. But generally we have strategies for service and strategies for developing leaders in service. The game plan should be broad enough to allow for the following ingredients:

- Making sure the players know how to handle their positions
- Constantly keeping them informed
- Helping them know where the problems are and how to solve them
- Consistently widening the team's perspective as the game develops

When recruiting players, it may be prudent to select the best player in the draft. On a basketball team, for example, you may need a tall center, but if a great small forward is available, you may want to grab him and revise the makeup of the team to fit him in. Let's not just design empty slots and then try to find people who fill those positions. Instead let's focus on people and then design positions that will allow them to use their God-given gifts and talents in serving the Lord.

### *Quality Control in Communication*

Good leaders understand the link between communication and motivation. A leader's comments have enormous impact on how team members feel about their positions, their teams, and their work. Positive conversation goes a long way toward lifting team spirit. I like the way William Plamondon put it:

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<sup>8</sup> H.B. London, Jr., "Being a Tough But Tender Leader," in *Leaders on Leadership* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1997), 112-113.

When it comes to communicating with employees, I have never viewed communication as merely sharing information but as sharing responsibility. Rather than telling people what to do, I ask them what needs to be done and then do my best to remove any obstacles in their way. This not only generates the best ideas but also gives people a stake in the success of effort. One of our customer service representatives put it best when she said, "If you want me to be there for the crash landing, you'd better invite me to the launch."<sup>9</sup>

### *Quality Control in Relationships*

Few evangelical ministries struggle over doctrine; our problems much more commonly develop over relationships. Teaching people how to live in love and unity can lead to significant progress in our quest for excellence. If obeyed, one New Testament passage could bring revival to some ministries almost overnight:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

### *Quality Control in Strategic Planning*

Almost every helpful management book emphasizes understanding why an organization exists, that is, its mission. Never confuse *mission* with *vision*. Judith Bardwick puts it this way:

Determining the business of the business is the first step in setting priorities. This is a major leadership responsibility because, without priorities, efforts are splintered and little is achieved. The best leaders get the organization to focus and to become involved only in what matters the most. . . . Achieving the mission against hard odds, hitting stretch targets in the business of the business—this is the glue that hold people together with the commitment to the good of all.<sup>11</sup>

As Kouzes and Posner repeatedly emphasize, effective leaders *challenge the process*. This doesn't mean they need be rebellious. Nor does it mean criticizing the behavior of other leaders. It simply requires us to continuously and unrelentingly asking, "Is there a better way to do this?" We achieve goals when we are willing to make adjustments along the way that enable the process to move ahead more competently and comfortably.

<sup>9</sup> William Palmondon, "Energy and Leadership," in *The Leader of the Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 275.

<sup>10</sup> Phil. 2:1-5 (NIV).

<sup>11</sup> Judith Bardwick, "Peacetime Management and Wartime Leadership," in *The Leader of the Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 134.

### *Quality Control in Empowerment*

Team leadership is an applied science and a useful art. We release people to serve by believing they are capable of using their freedom to enhance their ministry posts. Rather than thinking of meetings as a necessary evil, we value the act of convening as a primary part of our leadership roles, and we design those meetings for group decision-making rather than as a platform for our own speeches.

Peter Block talks about “the end of leadership” and describes his experience in organizational renewal. Revitalization, he says, commonly begins somewhere in the middle of an organization, not at the top. He disdains management which denies that motivation and responsibility can exist without the blessing of those in charge.

We will always need clear structures, measures, and rules to live by. The workplace begins to change only when employees join together in choosing the structure, measures, and rules. Clinging to our attraction to leadership keeps change in the hands of the few. We need to transfer it to the many. This is the power of citizenship. The task of the boss, then, is to convene people and engage them in the everyday challenges of how to plan, organize, discipline, and insure that the right people are on the team and doing the job right. Bosses become conveners and clarifiers, not visionaries, role models, or motivators.<sup>12</sup>

*Delegation* is the old word; today we commonly speak of *empowerment*. This means learning to let go—of authority, finances, decision-making, control—and “decentralizing” ourselves in order to advance and enhance the ministry of others.

Perhaps for the first time in the history of management science several major spokespersons are lining up with what the Bible has commanded for two thousand years. C. William Pollard addresses the issue of empowerment in an interesting way.

Will the real leader please stand up? Not the president, or the person with the most distinguished title, but the role model. Not the highest-paid person in the group, but the risk-taker. Not the person with the largest car or the biggest home, but the servant. Not the person who promotes himself or herself, but the promoter of others. Not the administrator, but the initiator. Not the taker, but the giver. Not the talker, but the listener.<sup>13</sup>

As Frances Hesselbein puts it:

The leader of the future does not sit on the fence, waiting to see which way the wind is blowing. The leader articulates clear positions on issues affecting the organization and is the embodiment of the enterprise, of its values and its principles. Leaders model desired behaviors, never break a promise, and know that leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do it.<sup>14</sup>

These paragraphs have not dealt with techniques and gadgets since excellence has no simple formula. I’m reminded of advice once offered by Will Rogers on the issue of national defense. He had just achieved fame in the Ziegfeld Follies at the time of

<sup>12</sup> Peter Block, “The End of Leadership,” *Leader to Leader*, (Winter 1997): 13.

<sup>13</sup> C. William Pollard, “The Leader Who Serves,” in *The Leader of the Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 241.

<sup>14</sup> Frances Hesselbein, “Journey to Transformation,” *Leader to Leader* (Winter 1998); 6.

World War I when German U-boats were discovered in the Atlantic much too close to the American shoreline. Everybody was upset about the problem and, when approached for his solution, Rogers shrugged his shoulders and said, "It's really quite simple. You heat the Atlantic Ocean to the boiling point and the U-boats will float to the surface and you pick them off." The shocked reporter raised the volume of his voice a notch and asked, "How on earth do you heat the Atlantic Ocean to the boiling point?" To which Rogers replied, "You just asked me what I would do; it's up to you to work out the details."

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#### About the Author

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