

# The Art of Self Leadership

Your toughest management challenge is always yourself.

Bill Hybels

Imagine a compass north, south, east, and west. Almost every time the word leadership is mentioned, in what direction do leaders instinctively think?

South.

Say the word leadership and most leaders' minds migrate to the people who are under their care. At leadership conferences, people generally think, "I'm going to learn how to improve my ability to lead the people God has entrusted to me."

South. It's a leader's first instinct.

But many people don't realize that to lead well, you need to be able to lead in all directions north, south, east and west.

For example, good leaders have to lead north those who are over you. You can't just focus on those entrusted to your care. Through relationship and influence good leaders lead the people over them. Much of what I do at Willow Creek, through relationship, prayer, and careful envisioning, is to try to influence those over me the board and the elders.

Effective leaders also learn how to lead east and west, laterally, in peer group settings. If you don't learn how to lead laterally, if you don't know how to create win-win situations with colleagues, the whole culture can deteriorate.

So a leader must lead down, up, and laterally. But perhaps the most overlooked leadership challenge is the one in the middle. Who is your toughest leadership challenge?

Yourself.

Consider 1 Samuel 30. David, the future king of Israel, is a young emerging leader at the time. He is just learning to lead his troops into battle. He's green. But God is pouring his favor on David, and most of the time the battles go his way. One terrible day though, that pattern changes. After returning home from fighting yet another enemy, David and his men discover soldiers have attacked and destroyed their campsite, dragged off the women and children, and burned all their belongings.

This would define "bad day" for any leader! But it's not over. His soldiers are tired, angry, and worried sick about their families. They're miffed at God. A faction of his men spreads word that they've had it with David's leadership. They figure it's all David's fault, and they decide to stone him to death.

In this crisis David's leadership is severely tested. Suddenly, he has to decide who needs leadership the most. His soldiers? The officers? The faction?

His answer? None of the above.

In this critical moment he realizes a foundational truth: he has to lead himself before he can lead anybody else. Unless he is squared away internally he has nothing to offer his team. So "David strengthened himself in the Lord his God" (1 Samuel 30:6). Only then does he lead his team to rescue their families and what's left of their belongings.

David understood the importance of self-leadership. And although self-leadership isn't talked about much, make no mistake, it is a good part of the ballgame. How effectively can any of us lead others if our spirits are sagging, our courage is wavering, and our vision or commitment is weak?

Last summer I read an article that created some disequilibrium for me. The author, Dee Hock, challenged leaders to calculate how much time and energy they invest in each of these directions people beneath them, over them, peers, and leading themselves. Since he's been thinking and writing about leadership for over 20 years and is a laureate in the Business Hall of Fame, I wanted his wisdom.

His recommendation: "We should invest 50 percent of our leadership amperage into the task of leading ourselves; and the remaining 50 percent should be divided into leading down, leading up, and leading laterally." His numbers bothered me so much I put the article away. But I let it simmer, which is my normal practice when someone messes with my mind.

While that was simmering, I read an article by Daniel Goleman, the author of the best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence*. Since that book was released in 1997, Goleman has been spending his time analyzing why some leaders develop to their fullest potential and why most hit a plateau far from their full potential.

His conclusion? The difference is (you guessed it) self-leadership. He calls it "emotional self-control." What characterizes maximized leadership potential, according to Goleman? Tenaciously staying in leadership despite overwhelming opposition or discouragement. Staying in the leadership game and maintaining sober-mindedness during times of crisis. Keeping ego at bay. Staying focused on the mission instead of being distracted by someone else's agenda. All these indicate high levels of emotional self-control. Goleman says, "Exceptional leaders distinguish themselves because of superior self-leadership."

As I read his corroborating data, I thought, *Maybe Dee Hock's percentages aren't all that absurd!*

Recall the first five chapters of Mark's Gospel. Remember Jesus' pattern of intense ministry quickly followed by time set aside for reflection, prayer, fasting, and solitude? That pattern is repeated throughout his ministry. Jesus was practicing the art of self-leadership. He would go to a quiet place and recalibrate. He would remind himself who he was and how much the Father loved him. Even Jesus needed to invest regularly in keeping his calling clear, avoiding mission drift, and keeping distraction and temptation at bay.

This is self-leadership. And nobody I mean nobody can do this work for you. You have to do this work yourself. Self-leadership is tough work so tough, Dee Hock says, that most leaders avoid it. Instead, we would rather try to inspire or control our people than to do the rigorous work of reflection.

Some years ago a top Christian leader disqualified himself from ministry. A published article described his demise: "[He] sank like a rock, beat up, burned out, angry and depressed, no good to himself and no good to the people he loved."

When this pastor finally wrote publicly about his experience, he said, "Eventually I couldn't even sleep at night. Another wave of broken lives would come to shore at the church, and I found I didn't have enough compassion for them any more. And inside I became angry, angry, angry. Many people still wonder whatever happened to me. They think I had a crisis of faith. The fact is I simply collapsed on the inside."

He failed the self-leadership test. He should have regrouped, reflected, recalibrated. Maybe taken a sabbatical or received some Christian counseling. Goleman would say that this guy lost his emotional self-control. Now he's out of the game.

A little closer to home, I'll never forget when three wise people came to me on behalf of the church. They said, "Bill, there were two eras during the first 20 years of Willow Creek history when by your own admission you were not at your leadership best once in the late seventies and again in the early nineties. The data shows Willow Creek paid dearly for your leadership fumble. It cost Willow more than you'll ever know when you were off not hitting on all 8 cylinders."

Then they said words I'll never forget: "Bill, the best gift you can give the people you lead here at Willow is a healthy, energized, fully surrendered, focused self. And no one can do that for you. You've got to do that for yourself." And while they were talking, the Holy Spirit was saying, "They're right, Bill. They're right."

Because I know what's at stake, I ask myself several self-leadership questions on a regular basis.

### **Is my calling sure?**

On this matter, I'm from the old school. I really believe that if you bear the name of Jesus Christ, you have a calling, whether you're a pastor or a lay person. We all must surrender ourselves fully to make ourselves completely available to God. Ask, "What's my mission, God? Where do you want me to serve? What would you have me do in this grand kingdom drama?"

Remember what Paul said about his calling? "I no longer consider my life as dear unto myself. Only that I fulfill the mission or the calling given to me by God himself" (Acts 20:24).

What happens when you receive a call from the holy God? Your life takes on focus. Energy gets released. You're on a mission.

I have to keep my calling sure. So on a regular basis I ask, *God, is your calling on my life still to be the pastor of Willow Creek and to help churches around the world?* And when I receive reaffirmation of that, then I say, "Then let's go! Let's forget all the other distractions and the temptations. Burn the bridges!"

If you've been called to be a leader, it's your responsibility to keep your calling sure. Post it on your refrigerator. Frame it and put it on your desk. Keep it foremost in your mind.

### **Is my vision clear?**

How can I lead people into the future if my picture of the future is fuzzy? Every year we have a Vision Night at Willow Creek. You know who started Vision Night? I did. Guess who I mainly do it for? Me. Every year when Vision Night rolls around on the calendar it means that I have to have my vision clear.

Every leader needs a Vision Night on the calendar. On that night you say, "Here's the picture; this is what we're doing; here's why we're doing it; if things go right, here's what the picture will look like a year from now.

We prepare very diligently for Vision Night at Willow Creek. We have countless meetings to discuss the future. We spend many hours in prayer: "God, is this what you would have?" We search the Scriptures. By the time Vision Night rolls around, the vision is clear again. But it takes a lot of work to clarify the vision and to keep it clear. Nobody can do that work for you. It's the leader's job.

### **Is my passion hot?**

Jack Welch, the celebrated leader of General Electric, says, "People in leadership have to have so much energy and passion that they energize and impassion people around them."

I couldn't agree more. When I appoint leaders, I don't look for 25-watt light bulbs. I look for 100-watt bulbs because I want them to light up everything and everyone around them.

Whose responsibility is it to keep a leader's passion fired up? The leader's. That's self-leadership.

Last year, at an elders' meeting, a couple of the elders asked me, "As busy as you are, why do you fly out on Friday nights to speak in some small out-of-the-way church to help them raise money or dedicate a new facility? Why do you do that?"

My answer: Because it keeps my passion hot.

Last year I helped a church in California dedicate their new building. One guy took me to the corner of the auditorium, peeled the carpet back, and showed me how everyone in the core of their church had inscribed the names of lost people in the concrete. Then they covered it over with carpet. In that auditorium they're praying fervently that the lost will be found.

It was a four-hour flight back to Chicago. I was buzzed the whole way. That church fired me up! I just love watching men and women throw themselves into the adventure of ministry. It inspires me. I know that my passion has to be white-hot if Willow is going to catch it. I can't become a 25-watt bulb nor can you.

We do a lot of conferences through the Willow Creek Association. At times pastors of flourishing churches will pull me aside and say under their breath, "I have to come here once or twice a year just to keep my fires lit." They seem embarrassed about being here so often, as if it's a sign of weakness.

I tell them, "If you're a leader, it's your job to keep your passion hot. Do whatever you have to do, read whatever you have to read, go wherever you have to go. And don't apologize. That's a big part of your job."

### **Is my character submitted to Christ?**

Leadership requires moral authority. Followers have to see enough integrity in the leader's life that high levels of trust can be built. When surveys are taken about what it is that inspires a follower to throw his or her lot in with a particular leader over a long period of time, near the top of every list is integrity.

A leader doesn't have to be the sharpest pencil in the drawer or the one with the most charisma. But teammates will not follow a leader with character incongruities for very long. Every time you compromise character you compromise leadership.

Some time ago we had a staff member who was struggling in his leadership. I started poking around a little bit. "What's going on here?" I asked.

Then the real picture emerged. One person said, "For one thing, he sets meetings and then he doesn't even show. He rarely returns phone calls and often we don't know where he is."

I spoke to that guy and said, "Let's get it straight. When you give your word that you're going to be at a certain place at a certain time and you don't show up, that's a character issue. That erodes trust in followers. You clean that up, or we'll

have to move you out." If character issues are compromised, it hurts the whole team and eventually impacts mission achievement.

I don't want to be a leader who demoralizes the troops and hurts the cause either. So on a regular basis, I sing Rory Noland's song in my times alone with God:

*Holy Spirit, take control.  
Take my body, mind, and soul.  
Put a finger on anything  
that doesn't please you,  
Anything that grieves you.  
Holy Spirit, take control.*

It's the leader's job to grow in character. No one can do that work except the leader.

### **Is my pride subdued?**

First Peter 5:5 says, "God opposes the proud. He gives grace to the humble." Do you know what Peter is saying? As a leader I have a choice. Do I want opposition from God in my leadership, or do I want grace and favor?

If you're a sailor, you know how hard it is to sail upwind. You also know how wonderful and relaxing it is to sail downwind. Peter is saying, "Which way do you want it? Do you want to sail upwind or downwind? If you're humble, the favor of God carries you. If you're proud, you're sailing into the wind. God opposes the proud."

Do you want to know the best way to find out if pride is affecting your leadership?

Ask.

Ask your teammates. Ask the people in your small group. Ask your spouse. Ask your colleagues. Ask your friends, "Do you ever sense a prideful spirit in or around my leadership?" If you just couldn't ask a question like that, then you probably do have a pride issue!

It's a leader's job with the Holy Spirit's help to subdue pride.

### **Are my fears at bay?**

Fear is an immobilizing emotion. Sometimes I ask pastors, "Why haven't you introduced more change in your church when you know the church is crying out for it?"

I ask business leaders who are hesitating to launch a new product, "Why haven't you pulled the pin?"

I ask political leaders why they haven't taken a stand on a particular issue, one I know they have strong personal convictions about.

So often the response is: "Because I am afraid." Fear immobilizes and neutralizes leaders.

Believe me, I am not above this. I remember the morning in the year 2000 when it became clear to me that we needed to launch a \$70 million building program. Our vision for the future was clear. The elders, the board, the management team signed off on it. The last step in the whole equation was for me to have the guts to pull the trigger. And you know what swirled around in my mind? *The minute you go public with a \$70 million campaign, there's no backing out. It's pass-fail.* I realized that everything we had worked for over the past 25 years, all the credibility our congregation has established in our community and around the world was on the line. Fear kept building in my heart. *Why expose Willow to that kind of risk? We're cruising along. We're growing and baptizing a thousand people a year. Why are we doing this?*

I am not above letting fear mess with my decision making as a leader.

At a certain point, I just had to say, "I can no longer let fear sabotage my leadership." I reminded myself of that little verse, 1 John 4:4, "Greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world." I asked myself: *Has God spoken to me? Has he made his direction clear? Is the leadership core with us? Is he going to love me if I fail? Am I still going to heaven if this whole thing doesn't turn out right?* I struggled but finally I found the courage to step out in faith. (The campaign was enormously blessed by God. Our church could have missed a great miracle had fear won the day.)

### **Are interior issues undermining my leadership?**

All of us have some wounds, some losses, and some disappointments in our past.

All that stuff has helped shape or misshape us into the people we are today. I laugh at people who say, "My past has not affected me. My family of origin has not affected me."

Leaders who ignore their interior reality often make decisions that have grave consequences for the people they lead. Most of the time, they're unaware of what's driving their unwise decisions. Some pastors make grandiose decisions that enslave everybody in their churches to an agenda that's not God's. It's an agenda that comes out of their need to be bigger than, better than, grander than.

Other leaders are incurable people pleasers. Every week they want to take a poll to see where they stand in the Nielsen ratings.

Who's responsible for your interior issues getting processed and resolved? You are. I am.

I've spent lots of time in a Christian counselor's office. I still am in contact with two Christian counselors. And whenever I think, *Man, there's some stuff coming out of me that has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit, and I don't understand it*, I call these counselors. I say, "I don't understand why I said what I said, why I did what I did. I know it's junk. Would you help me?" Effective leaders must get a handle on their "junk!"

### **Are my ears open to the Spirit's whisper?**

I estimate that 75 to 80 percent of the breakthrough ideas in my leadership over the years have come from promptings of the Holy Spirit, not through hard machinations of my mind. Some of the great sermon series or vision adjustments, value clarifications or strategy changes, some of the greatest people selections have not been due to my cleverness. It has been the Holy Spirit whispering to my spirit.

Leaders cannot afford to be deaf to heaven. Training, process, and strategy are all good. Developing your mind is essential. But ultimately, we walk by faith, not by sight. There is a supernatural dimension to leadership and it comes our way by keeping an ear open to heaven.

I ask myself regularly, *Can I still hear God's voice? Is the ambient noise level of my life low enough that I can still hear God's voice when he speaks? And do I still have the guts to obey him even though I don't understand him all the time?*

### **Is my pace sustainable?**

I came close to a total emotional meltdown in the early 1990s. Suffice it to say I didn't understand self-leadership. I didn't understand the principle of sustainability. I fried my emotions. I abused my spiritual gifts. I damaged my body. I neglected my family and friends. And I came within a whisker of becoming a statistic.

I remember sitting in a restaurant and writing: "The pace at which I've been doing the work of God is destroying God's work in me." Then I remember putting my head down on my spiral notebook in that restaurant and sobbing.

But I asked myself, *Bill, who has a gun to your head? Who's forcing you to bite off more than you can chew? Who's intimidating you into overcommitting? Whose approval and affirmation and applause other than God's are you searching for that makes you live this way?* The answers were worse than sobering. They were devastating.

The elders, to whom I'm accountable, did not cause my pace problem. It wasn't caused by the board or the staff or family or friends. The whole pace issue was a problem of my own making. I had no one else to blame. That's a terribly lonely feeling having no one else to blame.

So I sat all alone in this cheap restaurant in South Haven, mad as a hornet that I couldn't blame anybody for my kingdom exhaustion and my emotional numbness. To find the bad guy, I had to look in a mirror.

To further complicate matters, the only person who can put a sustainability program together for your future is you. For 15 years, I lived overcommitted and out of control, and deep down I kept saying, *Why aren't the elders rescuing me? Why aren't my friends rescuing me? Don't people see I'm dying here?*

But it isn't their job. It's my job. Please, if you haven't already, commit yourself to developing an approach to leadership that will enable you to endure over the long haul.

### **Are my gifts developing?**

Pop quiz: What are your top three spiritual gifts? If you cannot articulate them as quickly as you can give your name, address, and phone number, I'm tempted to say, "You need your cage rattled!" Before you write me a note telling me I've made you feel bad, I need to let you know that on this issue, I have Sympathy Deficit Disorder. Maybe I need medication or something. But seriously, leaders have to master their spiritual gift profile. They must know which gifts they've been given and how they rank in order.

In addition, the Bible holds every leader accountable before God for developing each of those gifts to the zenith of their spiritual potential.

It's sobering to have to ask myself regularly, *Bill, you know God's only given you three gifts. Some people have five, six, or seven. You've been given three-- leadership, evangelism, and teaching. Are you growing them? Developing, stretching these gifts? Reading everything you can read? Getting around people who are better than you in these areas? Are you developing the three gifts God has given you?* Because those are the ones I've been given, they're the only ones I'm going to stand accountable for before God someday. I'm learning that I cannot give myself any slack when it comes to spiritual gift development.

**Is my heart for God increasing? And is my capacity for loving deepening?**

Have you reminded yourself recently whose job it is to grow your heart for God? Is it the church's job? Your small group's job? No. It's your job to make sure your heart for God is increasing. Nobody can do that for you. You've got to develop the spiritual practices that keep you growing towards Christlikeness.

Likewise, is your capacity for loving people deepening? If you think about it, you realize God has only one kind of treasure. It's people.

When our kids were young and Lynne and I needed some husband-wife time, we'd get a babysitter. And I'd give those sitters my little talk. As we were heading out, I would say, "You need to know something. We only have two treasures in this life, only two. I don't care if you wreck our car or if the house burns down while we're gone. Really. Just promise me. Promise me you'll take really good care of our children. They are all that really matter to us in this world."

God is saying to leaders, "Promise me. Give me your word. Take care of my treasures. Grow in leadership so that you become the greatest you can be at taking care of my treasures. Love them. Nurture them. Develop them. Challenge them. Mature them. They are all that really matters to me in this world."

And right now would be a good time for you to say to God, "I will."

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