
BOOK EXCERPT

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP



Moving People onto God's Agenda¹



HENRY & RICHARD BLACKABY

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

In a world where the pounding waves of political, economic, technological, and cultural forces are deafening, leadership takes on a special significance for Christians in the marketplace. How can Christ-followers who define and execute visions for their organizations be effective and truthful to their faith so that, they, like Paul, "...are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair" (2 Cor. 4:8, NIV)? In this CBR issue where we invite a deep reflection on leadership in a world frequently thrust into turmoil (let alone the ravage of a pandemic we are still living through), it is helpful to set the stage for this discussion by reminding ourselves of the high calling of spiritual leadership. In the following excerpt from Henry and Richard Blackaby's book, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People onto God's Agenda*, the authors shed light on God's agenda for Christian leaders who must set worthy goals for their organizations. We greatly appreciate LifeWay Christian Resources for the permission to reprint this material.

¹ Taken from *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda* by Henry and Richard Blackaby, ©2011 "Chapter 5. The Leader's Goal: Moving People on to God's Agenda." Reprinted and used by permission of B&H Publishing Group, an imprint of LifeWay Christian Resources, Nashville, TN. 37234, www.bhpublishinggroup.com.

Leaders acquiring a new position must ask: “Where should my organization go?” This question may seem simplistic, but it is amazing how many leaders become so enmeshed in the mundane aspects of the journey they lose sight of the destination. Or they have detailed plans of what they hope to achieve, but they failed to examine whether their objectives will lead them to where God wants them to be. If leaders do not clearly understand where their organization is and where it should be moving, they will be ineffective. The following are three of the most common, and perhaps most subtle, organization goals that can disorient leaders to their true purpose.

▶ UNWORTHY GOALS

ACHIEVING RESULTS

The demand for measurable results puts pressure on leaders to focus on quick accomplishments. What better way to appear successful than to set a goal and then meet it? According to Peter Drucker, a person hasn’t led unless results have been produced.¹

Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, in their book *Built to Last*, argue that great leaders do not establish goals and then mobilize their organizations to achieve them at all costs. Rather, they concentrate on building great organizations. Leaders can achieve their goals for a time but destroy their organizations in the process. However, organizations that focus on being healthy will regularly achieve their goals.

In the past organizations were generally built on the vision and goals of their leaders. Leaders made the plans; everyone else followed. But as Peter Senge contends in *The Fifth Discipline*: “It is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organization, a Ford, or a Sloan, or a Watson. It’s just not possible any longer to ‘figure it out’ from the top and have everyone else following the orders of the ‘grand strategist.’ The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization.”²

According to (Max) DePree (former chairman of the board of Herman Miller), leaders should enter a “covenantal relationship” with those they lead. He describes this as a “shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals, and to management processes. ... Covenantal relationships are

open to influence. They fill deep needs and they enable work to provide meaning and fulfillment. Covenantal relationships reflect unity and grace and poise. They are an expression of a sacred nature of relationships.”³

Leaders who achieve their goals but whose people suffer and fall by the wayside in the process have failed. Using people to achieve organizational goals is the antithesis of spiritual leadership. ... In God’s eyes how something is done is as important as what is done (Num. 20:1-13). The end does not justify the means. Getting results can make leaders look good. God’s way magnifies his name.

PERFECTIONISM

“God expects the best!” “Nothing but excellence is good enough for God!” How often we hear these emphatic assertions, sincerely expressed by Christian leaders. They sound noble, yet there is a subtle danger inherent in the philosophy that everything done in an organization must always be done with excellence.

The apostle Paul did not claim his purpose was to do everything perfectly. Instead, he declared his aim was to “proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. I labor for this, striving with His strength that works powerfully in me” (Col. 1:28-29).

Paul focused on developing people. He sought to take them from their spiritual immaturity and bring them to spiritual maturity. His joy came from seeing those he led blossom into the people God intended for them to become. The approach of many modern Christian organizations is contrary to that of Paul.

The primary goal of spiritual leadership is not excellence in the sense of doing things perfectly. Rather, it is taking people from where they are to where God wants them to be. There is a tension here, for leaders want to motivate their people to develop their talents for the glory of God. But to help people grow, leaders may have to allow them to make mistakes.

SIZE

The Western world is mesmerized by size. Leaders of the largest churches or companies are automatically viewed as experts. If a leader has grown a religious organization to a significant size, people interpret that as a clear sign of God’s blessing. That may not be so. ... Marketers can attract a crowd. They can’t grow a church. Cults can lure a crowd. They

can't build God's kingdom. If numerical growth is a sure sign of God's blessing, then some cults are enjoying God's blessing to a greater extent than many churches.

The misconception is based on people's assumption that God is as impressed with crowds as people are. He is not. The essence of Satan's temptations for Jesus was trying to convince him to draw a crowd rather than build a church (Matt. 4). When Jesus fed five thousand people, he became so popular the people wanted to forcibly make him their king. Jesus knew that, even though a multitude was following him, many of them did not believe. They were merely looking for a free lunch. So Jesus preached about the cost of discipleship. "From that moment ma-

ny of His disciples turned back and no longer accompanied Him" (John 6:66). So vast was the exodus Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked if they intended to abandon him too (v. 67). Jesus was never enamored with crowds. In fact, he often sought to escape them (Mark 1:35-37).

► WORTHY GOALS

DEVELOPING PEOPLE

The ultimate goal of spiritual leadership is...to take their people from where they are to where God wants them to be. God's primary concern for people is not results but relationship. Calling comes before vocation. There is a profound comment on this issue in Exodus 19:4: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me."

At first glance this verse can appear confusing. We tend to assume God delivered the Israelites from Egypt so he could bring them into the Promised Land. But that is not what God said. The key for God was not Canaan. That was just the means God used to draw his people to himself. God's agenda was his people. The reason the Israelites spent forty years wandering in the wilderness was not that God could not bring them into Canaan. God kept them in the wilderness for forty years to establish a relationship of faith with them.

According to Max De Pree, the first responsibility of leaders is to "define reality" for their organizations.⁴ Ronald Heifetz describes this as "getting on the balcony" in order to gain a clear view of the present situation.⁵ Followers do not always understand the full implications of what their organization is experiencing. They may be so immersed in the minutia of their day-to-day routines they do not see the big picture. It is a spiritual leader's responsibility to keep the big picture in mind and to help their people understand God's activity in the midst of the daily challenges.

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This truth can be seen in the way God walked with Moses. Scripture says, "He revealed His ways to Moses, His deeds to the people of Israel."

The Israelites saw God's acts. How could they miss them? God sent ten horrendous plagues on Egypt. He parted the Red Sea and obliterated the Egyptian army. God fed an entire nation with manna from heaven and brought water out of a rock. The pressing question is: after all the people witnessed, why did they continually struggle to trust and obey God? It is because, although they saw God's acts, they never gained the higher perspective of God's ways. The ways of God reflect on who God is, not merely what God does. When God destroyed the mighty Egyptian army, the Israelites were certainly appreciative at that moment. But they never understood that the same God who destroyed the Egyptian army could just as easily annihilate Canaanite armies. So, despite all God did, the next time the Israelites faced a new challenge, they grew frightened and discouraged once again. Spiritual leaders must help their people see beyond God's acts to recognize the way God consistently works with his people, time and time again. To do this, spiritual leaders must develop their own understanding and recognition of God's activity in their midst.

Spiritual leaders understand people tend to be disoriented to God. So they teach them to know God better. Once the people learn to recognize God's voice and determine his leading, the organization will have enormous potential for serving God. Its effectiveness will not depend on one overworked leader always having to decide what God is guiding them to do. The group will all know how to hear from God and recognize his activity. When spiritual leaders have brought

their people to this point, they have truly led.

Business leaders must understand their preeminent task is to equip their people to function at their God-given best and not simply to accomplish organizational goals. From a secular perspective Peter Senge calls this a “learning organization.”

Spiritual leaders in the workplace must also understand their calling is first to please their heavenly Father, then to satisfy their board of directors and supervisors. It is appropriate to provide

spiritual guidance and encouragement to employees as well as to clientele. CEOs have a responsibility to care for the spiritual well-being of their employees. This should include praying regularly for their salvation. It may also involve providing a Christian witness. One business leader prayed about how to make seeking God’s kingdom a top priority at his workplace. God led him to start a Bible study at work. This proved to be one of the greatest challenges this executive faced during his eventful tenure at his publicly traded company. Yet through that Bible study, people encountered God in powerful ways.

EQUIPPING OTHERS TO LEAD

Leaders lead followers. Great leaders lead leaders. One of the worst mistakes leaders commit is making themselves indispensable. Insecurity can drive people to hoard all the leadership initiatives so no one else appears as capable or as successful. At times leaders become so immersed in their own work they fail to develop other leaders. If some people were completely honest, they might confess they enjoy being in high demand. They covet the organizational limelight. However, whether by design or neglect, failing to develop leaders in an organization constitutes gross failure by the leader.

Many leaders work extremely hard at their jobs and enjoy remarkable success during their leadership tenure. But a test of great leaders is whether or not their organizations can function well upon their departure. This phenomenon can be clearly seen in the life of Samuel. Samuel was one of the godliest leaders in Israel’s history. At the close of his leadership, no one with whom he had worked could find fault with him (1 Sam. 12:1-5). Nevertheless, Samuel ultimately failed as a

leader, for he did not prepare a successor:

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges over Israel. His first-born son’s name was Joel and his second was Abijah. They were judges in Beersheba. However, his sons did not walk in his ways – they turned toward dishonest gain, took

bribes, and perverted justice. So all the elders of Israel gathered together went to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “Look, you are old, and your sons do

not follow your example. Therefore, appoint a king to judge us the same as all the other nations have.” (1 Sam. 8:1-5)

As long as the Israelites had the noble Samuel to guide them, they followed without protest. But when Samuel grew old and appointed his sons Joel and Abijah to replace him, the people resisted. Later generations have castigated the Israelites for rejecting God’s leadership and demanding a king. The fact is the spiritual leaders available to them were so inferior they considered a secular king preferable. Had Samuel groomed an acceptable replacement, the people might not have clamored for a king. The people’s failure stemmed from their leader’s failure to do his job in developing effective leaders.

Unless leaders are intentional about investing in the development of people within their organization, it will not happen. There are at least four habits leaders must regularly practice if they are to produce a corps of emerging leaders.

1. Leaders delegate. This is often difficult. Leaders are generally skilled individuals who can do many things well. In addition, if they are perfectionists, as leaders often are, they will be tempted to undertake more than they should so things are “done right.” The inherent danger, of course, is that the organization’s growth is directly tied to the leader’s available time and energy. Leaders are, by nature, decision makers. However, it is unwise for leaders to make all the decisions. Doing so impedes the growth of emerging leaders. As Peter Drucker suggests, “Ef-

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fective executives do not make a great many decisions. They concentrate on the important ones.”⁶

2. Leaders give people freedom to fail. If leaders are going to develop other leaders, they must delegate. But when they do, they must refrain from interfering. ... Henry Ford gave his only son Edsel the responsibility for overseeing his automotive business. The younger Ford had innovative and practical ideas that would make the company more efficient in the face of growing competition. Yet as Edsel sought to implement his ideas, the elder Ford constantly countermanded his son's orders. Soon after Edsel became president, he initiated building an addition to the Hyde Park plant. After the ground was excavated for the new building's foundation, Henry intervened, claiming the building was unnecessary. Edsel succumbed and offered to have the opening covered up. His father insisted, however, that the pit remain for a time as a graphic example of his authority and his son's humiliation.⁷ The relationship between father and son was irreparably damaged. Finally, Edsel's fragile health broke and the Ford Motor Company languished under the administrative quagmire.
3. Leaders recognize others' success. A sure way to stifle staff initiative is to take the credit for something a subordinate did. Good leaders delegate. They resist interfering. Then, when the job is done, they reward those responsible. ... Although few leaders deliberately steal credit, this can happen inadvertently. If leaders fail to point out employees' efforts, people assume the leader is responsible for the success. If leaders continually ignore or steal the credit for work their people have done, people will naturally grow reluctant to give their best effort. In reality, when the people are successful, so is the leader.
4. Leaders provide encouragement and support. Jim Collins claims great leaders use the “window and the mirror.” When something goes right, they look out the window to find someone in the organization to assign the credit.

When something goes wrong, leaders stand before the mirror and assume the blame.⁸ Coaches of professional sports teams are well acquainted with this reality. If the team wins the championship, the athletes assume most of the credit and seek more lucrative contracts. But when the team performs poorly, the coach is usually the first person to be fired. Good leaders don't make excuses. They recognize their organization's performance will be viewed as equal to their own.

GLORIFYING GOD

Spiritual leaders should have a third goal for their organizations, one which is the ultimate aspiration of any organization – to glorify God. You can glorify God through your leadership, regardless of whether you lead a Christian or a secular organization.

Leaders glorify God by accomplishing God's purposes and moving people on to his agenda. Accurately reflecting God's nature to others brings him glory.

Spiritual leaders cannot relentlessly pursue their own personal goals and glorify God at the same time. It is possible to bring an organization to the apex of success but dis-

honor God in the process. True spiritual leaders value glorifying God more than personal or organizational success.

When Jesus was seeking twelve disciples, he bypassed the professional religious establishment and enlisted businesspeople, including two pairs of fishermen and a tax collector. He found people who understood how the world operated and who were unafraid of working in the middle of it. He chose people who spoke the language of the marketplace. God does nothing by accident. When God places someone in a leadership position, he has a purpose. A Christian's first calling is to honor God.

Glorifying God is not complicated. People do it when they reveal God's nature to the world around them. Leaders glorify God by accomplishing God's purposes and moving people on to his agenda. Accurately reflecting God's nature to others brings him glory. When Christians forgive others, people learn that God is one who forgives. When Christian leaders are patient with those who fail, people experience that God's nature is long-suffering. When Christian leaders live with in-

tegrity, people gain a glimpse of God's holiness. Many people's first impression of the true God may be reflected in the Christians who work alongside them each week.

God has a specific agenda for every person and organization. However, developing your people, equipping leaders, and, most importantly, glorifying God ought to be bedrock objectives of every leader.



NOTES

¹ Peter F. Drucker, foreword to *The Leader of the Future*, ed. Francis Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmit, and Richard Beckhard (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), xii.

² Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990; Paperback ed., 1994), 4.

³ Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1989), 60.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1994), 252.

⁶ Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1996), 637.

⁷ Steven Watts, *The Peoples' Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century* (New York: Random House, 2005; Vintage Books ed., 2006), 361.

⁸ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 34-35

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