

## **Ten Things We Need to Know about Healthy Leadership**

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We hear a lot these days about leadership. The word “leadership” is sometimes used naively and rather simplistically to indicate a positive quality. “She’s a real leader,” someone will say, or “now that’s leadership!”

But the reality is that leadership can either be good or bad, constructive or destructive; or (as we will see in this audio workshop) leadership can either be healthy or unhealthy.

How do we distinguish healthy from unhealthy leadership?

Well, I would say that leadership that allows a group or an institution to mature in setting goals for the larger good and in deepening its life-enhancing values is healthy. Leadership that contributes to the health and well-being of those who are served by an organization and by those who provide the service is healthy. Leadership that encourages creativity and courage and the development of public virtue in a society is healthy.

But leadership, to the contrary, that engenders hatred and fear, suspicion and anxiety, leadership that fosters secrecy, conformity and isolation is unhealthy. Leadership promoting the private self interests of the powerful while neglecting the public good is unhealthy. Leadership that thrives on falsehood, at the expense of truth, and factionalism and violence, at the expense of reconciliation and peace, is unhealthy.

And unhealthy leadership is no less unhealthy just because it is popular. The effects of healthy and unhealthy leadership often most keenly felt over the long-haul.

Today’s introduction to healthy leadership will introduce you to a wide range of models for thinking about and effecting healthy leadership in your own organization. It is drawn from the experience and research of some of the best thinkers and practitioners today, and it is designed for you to put directly into practice.

This audio workshop will serve you best if you first simply listen to it, taking notes if that is possible. An electronic version of this workshop, including a resource guide for further reflection, is available through the website of the College of Pastoral Leaders of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. You may find it helpful later to listen to the workshop again with the transcript before you. The resource guide contains full references for all the resources I refer to in the audio workshop.

## **Leadership matters**

Before talking specifically about the things that make for healthy leadership, I want to commend you for caring about healthy leadership, and for investing yourself in leadership. Healthy leadership matters; and healthy leadership is not always easy.

Anthony Robinson recently commented on this subject in *Christian Century* magazine. Robinson said that good leaders “mobilize the rest of us.”

We need healthy leadership; and in the absence of healthy leaders, people will follow whatever moves.

Leaders leap from the pages of the Bible:

Abraham trusts God enough to lead his tribe to a new land;

Moses leads God’s people out of bondage and through the wilderness;

King David’s shadow is so huge it stretches to the present day;

Peter, James and John, all led among the disciples;

Paul, gave us the first and most important missionary movement of the Christian Church.

While there is considerable skepticism, even cynicism, in our culture regarding some of our political leaders, and this has naturally eroded the regard that many people have toward public leadership, nevertheless we live in an age starved for responsible and energetic, prudent and wise, open and selfless leadership.

We need leaders who care about people, and who care about goals, and who care about the appropriate uses of power and influence.

According to Scott Adams, the creator of the very funny but sometimes rather cynical Dilbert cartoons, “Leadership takes many forms, and sometimes just being annoying is exactly what the situation requires.” Even Dilbert yearns for good, healthy leadership, though he finds very little of it in cubicle-land. That’s what makes Scott Adams so funny—and so interesting.<sup>1</sup>

My comments about healthy leadership are intended to be practical and concrete. I distrust idealism and abstraction, so these reflections are down-to-earth, ready for your use.

I believe there are basically ten things we all need to know about healthy leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Principle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 229.

## 1. Healthy leaders lead from their own spiritual and emotional health.

Several years ago, Henri Nouwen wrote a beautiful and profoundly moving book, *The Wounded Healer*. I wish more people today would read this wonderful book for the wisdom it contains. But I wish fewer people used its title to validate their own emotionally and spiritually bankrupt leadership.

Nouwen encourages Christians to be wounded *healers*, not wounded *wounders*, or (worse still) *unhealed open wounds*. According to Nouwen, “the first and most basic task of the Christian leader in the future will be to lead his people out of the land of confusion into the land of hope. Therefore, he must first have the courage to be an explorer of the new territory in himself and to articulate his discoveries as a service to the inward generation.”<sup>2</sup>

Healthy leaders are spiritually and emotionally whole persons.

That does not mean that you have to be a comic book superhero to be a good leader. Spiritual and emotional wholeness is rooted in a true estimation of ourselves in relation to God.

If there’s one biblical text that I think every healthy leader should keep close at hand it is: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8) To put it another way, a healthy leader is reverent in relation to God and respectful of other persons, willing to listen to the perspectives of others, open to criticism, prepared to do what is right whatever that may cost, and more ready to help people succeed than to punish them when they fail.

The emotional health needed to be a healthy leader is grounded in that openness to others that makes growth both possible and necessary.

Recently our seminary faculty conducted a nationwide study of what lay persons want in their pastors. The most frequent characteristic they named in describing the good pastor was “humble.”

Now, humility has gotten a bad rap in recent years. But humble need not mean “wishy-washy” or weak. Rather humility refers to a particular attitude toward God that bears fruit in relationship to others. The humble leader says, “I am not God. I am a human being. I will honor, adore and worship God as God. And, for God’s sake, I will respect the humanity of others.”

Practically speaking the implications of this kind of healthy leadership can hardly be over-estimated. The healthy leader listens to others carefully and respectfully, sometimes holding back from interrupting the speaker, because the healthy leader respects the speaker and is ready to learn. The healthy leader does not rush into every situation assuming that he or she has the solution. Indeed, the healthy leader is more eager to reflect than to react. One of the most common mistakes of a new pastor, for example, is to assume that the Church she has been called to has never gotten it quite right before, that it has just been waiting all its history for her to arrive and to set the congregation straight.

This rather arrogant attitude, whether in a congregation or a non-profit organization, is a recipe for disaster. The first task of a leader is to be identified as the

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<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), 40.

lover of that organization; and every true lover knows that the best way to show your love is to listen attentively, rather than to talk.

## **2. Healthy leaders are dedicated to the health of others.**

One of my pet peeves is the sort of person who, when they get the flu, insists on sharing their sickness with everyone they meet. Rather than staying home, resting and drinking lots of fluids, they seem to thrive on being contagious. I just hate it when someone comes dragging into a meeting, trailing Kleenex tissues, sniffing and sneezing, spreading their virus with their co-workers.

While the health of healthy leaders is also contagious, and in some really good ways, the sickness of unhealthy leaders is a danger to everyone they come in contact with.

Do you remember the Charlie Brown comic-strip character who always had that little rain cloud hanging above his head? Some leaders are like that. A storm of organizational chaos and illness, anxiety, anger and emotional triangulation seem to follow them everywhere.

On the other hand, healthy leaders spread the contagion of organizational health. There's a reason why saints of old were so often pictured with halos above their heads. It doesn't mean that they are all cheerful and sunshine when smiles were out of order; but it does mean that they exuded a palpable, perhaps even visible, sense of spiritual and emotional health.

I like to look for leaders who spread health among the people they serve.

There's a tough side, however, to the healthy leader's commitment to health. Sometimes encouraging health in others requires us to act in ways we wouldn't ordinarily want to act. I doubt, for example, if most nurses really enjoy inoculating children. What healthy person would enjoy sticking a needle into a child's arm and making the child cry? But good nurses have the ability, the deep capacity, the inner strength, and the will to look beyond the tears they cause to the injection's power to prevent future disease.

A few years ago, I was responsible for placing seminary students in internships. I remember one student who, upon returning from her internship, said to me:

"I was so angry at you all summer because of the internship you placed me in." (Now, I made her do a summer chaplaincy internship in a particularly tough hospital Clinical Pastoral Education program.) She said, "You told me it would be good for me, and I can see now that it was, but I was furious with you most of the summer."

I nodded, "Yes, I'll bet you were mad at me."

Then she said, "Don't you care that I was angry at you?"

I paused, took a deep breath. "No," I answered her, "Your growth and learning are more important to me than whether you are happy with me."

A healthy leader enjoys pleasing people as much as anyone does. Healthy leaders like happiness. But there are times when a healthy leader must do precisely those things, for the sake of the organization's health, that the organization may not like. The healthy leader must be strong enough (and this includes being strong enough politically) to survive doing what is necessary. And the healthy leader must be humble enough to recognize the danger of her own goals being at odds with the organization's, but leaders

who do not prize the health of the organization above their own comfort are not worthy of leadership.<sup>3</sup>

### **3. Healthy leaders represent the character and mission of the organization they serve, but are also capable of objectivity toward their organization.**

Garry Wills was right when he said: “Show me your leader and you have bared your soul.”<sup>4</sup> The leaders an organization chooses reflect the values, hopes, and beliefs, but also the ambivalence, the ambiguities, the conflicts, the limitations, uncertainties and struggles within the soul of that organization.

Leaders have a sort of priestly role (the root meaning of the word priest is “to bridge”). Leaders, like the priests of ancient Israel, represent the group they lead. It’s for this reason that the High Priest of Israel, when he offered sacrifices in the Holy of Holies of the ancient Hebrew Temple, wore a breast plate that bore the symbols of every tribe of Israel. The High Priest symbolically carried the entire nation into God’s presence when he made the sacrifices on their behalf.

Any leader who does not profoundly represent the identity and aspirations of a people will not belong to that people in a larger sense as their leader. The leader who does not belong will not significantly influence the organization or contribute to its transformation.

When politicians eat the local cuisine of South Carolina, or Boston, or Central Iowa, they are trying to say, “I belong to you. I represent you.” And how convincing they are goes a long way toward their elect-ability.

Every leader also bears a kind of prophetic role, too. A healthy leader not only belongs (which must mean that you fit the traditions, the history and the expectations of the group you hope to lead), but the healthy leader also must be comfortable with the role of the forward-looking visionary.

A healthy leader cannot just look backward toward tradition. A healthy leader must be the kind of person who is capable of imagining a larger future for the organization. The healthy leader gathers up the hopes and dreams of a people and articulates them as a viable and achievable set of plans. The healthy leader re-presents the organization’s deep identity and aspirations as a new vision among the people on a day-to-day basis. A leader who does not challenge an organization simply isn’t worth much to it. And, as Jesus said, salt that has lost its flavor is tossed out.

Garry Wills sees leadership, to use in his terminology, as Trinitarian, rather than Unitarian. He’s not actually speaking theologically here. Rather, he means that good leaders understand that leadership is dynamic and relational. Wills writes: “The leader is one who mobilizes others toward a goal shared by leader and followers.... Most literature on leadership is Unitarian. But life is Trinitarian. One-legged or two-legged chairs do not, of themselves, stand. A third leg is needed. Leaders, followers and goals make up the three equally necessary supports of leadership.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Jinkins, *Transformational Ministry: Church Leadership and the Way of the Cross* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

It's often difficult for new leaders to learn this. But, in over thirty years of leadership in the Church, I have never personally known any pastor to get fired for having an inadequate concept of the divine hypostasis. However, I've known a lot of pastors whose leadership failed because they were lousy at relationships.

The same can be said more generally of organizational leadership. Often when an organization fails to galvanize support around a new idea, it is because the leader has failed to connect at a deep personal level with the organization as a whole.

Leaders must *give* respect to others, and they must *earn* their trust. This is, I think, a simple, but crucial piece of wisdom: *Respect can be given, but trust must be earned.*

Leaders have to allow enough distance between themselves and followers that they can see the larger context of what this particular organization needs at this particular time. But leaders must develop genuine and meaningful personal relationships among the people they lead, both for the sake of the relationships themselves and so that they can gain from the people a sense of how to build on their shared identity, values and aspirations.

#### **4. Good leaders understand the organization as a social system.**

The late Rabbi Edwin Friedman, one of the key figures in the application of family systems theory to congregational leadership and the author of the classic study *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), once described a sort of contract between a therapist and a client.

When a client comes to a therapist for counseling, the client basically says: *"I want you to help me get healthier, and I will do everything in my power to keep you from doing that."*

According to Friedman, this is similar to the contract between an organization and its leader: *"We want you to help the organization grow and move forward. And we promise to resist your leadership at every stage."*

This is why James Dittes, in a book about leadership and conflict in the Church, once said that the real work of ministry begins *"when the people say no."*<sup>6</sup>

When the people resist a new idea or plan, they are articulating their values, their beliefs and hopes (even if this articulation takes the negative form of anxiety and distress). They are asking their leader to help them understand how this "NEW IDEA" or this "NEW PLAN" relates to who they have always been and what they have always cared about. Resistance is simply an expression of an organization's struggle with self-understanding, and the people of the organization need to be respected and not summarily dismissed as "tradition-bound" by their impatient leader.

Resistance is also an essential aspect of change. Resistance is almost inevitably an attempt to re-interpret the "new" and "innovative" by reaching back into the histories and traditions, myths and legends that have shaped the organization, trying to determine if the "new" is a radical departure from the "old," or is simply a new take, a revision, a

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<sup>6</sup> James Dittes, *When the People Say No: Conflict and the Call to Ministry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 1-19.

reformation of what has gone before. At the heart of resistance lies the need of all persons to make sense of their history and their identity in light of change.

If leaders deal with resistance among their people sensitively, creatively and with integrity, their leadership is enhanced even (maybe especially) in the midst of conflict.

The converse, however, is also true.

If leaders show disrespect toward the people's attempts to understand the new in light of tradition, the leaders may not simply stretch their people, they may break the tentative and relatively fragile bonds of trust between the people and their leadership.<sup>7</sup>

Healthy leadership is, in and of itself, therapeutic to the life of an organization. Healthy leadership, in other words, promotes healthy organizations. But, leaders need to be clear (not least with themselves) about the therapeutic nature of leadership and the role the leader assumes in relation to the group.

The leader must be prepared, graciously and tenaciously, to engage resistance and even sabotage, listening to the concerns that are raised, responding to those who have the concerns, even modifying plans when necessary, but clearly defining the direction of the organization according to the organization's own best lights.

It is not a sign of healthy leadership to allow the sickest and weakest members of the organization to hold it hostage. Leaders who wish to engage in this quality of leadership must possess self-awareness.

Ron Heifetz is author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, easily the best book yet written on leadership; he's also director of the Leadership Education Project at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Ron warns leaders to beware of their default modes, the emotional reactions to which we resort when placed under stress, because our default settings so often undercut our best intentions.

Heifetz's insight reminds me of the emotional bait we inevitably rise to, the bait that contains a barbed hook. When you are under stress, tired, feeling besieged, perhaps rushed, that's when you are most likely to trip into your default mode. Perhaps under stress, you become less flexible; perhaps your usually wide vision telescopes so we see fewer options; perhaps you retreat into yourself precisely when you need to open up and listen to others.<sup>8</sup>

Good leadership demonstrates the maturity, first, to discover the default modes to which we resort under stress, and, second, to find strategies to resist them.

## **5. Healthy leaders are capable of providing a non-anxious presence and emotionally well-differentiated leadership.**

The reason it is so crucial to discover and strategically overcome our default modes is because good leadership requires that we provide a non-anxious presence in our

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<sup>7</sup> Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, second edition, 1992), 49-69.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); also see Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

organization and that we maintain well-differentiated leadership. Both of these terms “non-anxious presence” and “self-differentiation” also come from Edwin Friedman’s family systems theory, and both require considerable skill and self-understanding.

One of the greatest qualities of a healthy leader is the ability to speak for him or herself, to clearly express and own up to his or her perspective. Statements like, “I believe,” “I think,” “I hope” represent self-differentiation. A well-differentiated leader says: “I believe this. Now, what do you believe?” “I think this. What do you think?” “I hope this. What are your hopes?”

These are questions raised by a leader who respects others.

The tendency among some leaders to habitually speak in the “royal we” reveals a degree (sometimes a very large degree) of anxiety. I’m thinking of leaders who try to manipulate agreement or rush to consensus by enforcing a “we-all-think” mentality, at the expense of critical reflection. There may be many causes for this kind of unhealthy leadership, but at the heart of (at least some) unhealthy leadership is anxiety.

Anxiety is hard to deal with. And anxiety is toxic to healthy leadership.

If there’s any word that characterizes the present state of society it is anxiety. And one thing I know, anxious people don’t make the best decisions.

There are lots of people today in society, in politics, in churches, in all sorts of organizations, who fuel anxiety in order to motivate and manipulate people to do what they want.

Healthy leaders know that anxiety makes for very poor motivation, because it shuts down a people’s ability to think constructively and creatively. Anxiety is pretty good at getting people to fearfully fall into line. But, if we want to develop leadership among people, anxiety is a very poor motivator.

I recently identified in some chronically anxious organizations what I would call the “syllogism of anxiety.”

If you’ve ever studied philosophy, you may remember how Aristotle used syllogisms as a tool of logic. A syllogism consists of two propositions from which a third statement may be deduced.

An Aristotelian syllogism might work something like this:

*A square is a parallelogram with four equal sides.*

*The figure I have drawn on this piece of paper is a parallelogram with four equal sides.*

*Therefore this figure is a square.*

You may also have seen how some syllogisms can get out of whack. My favorite fractured syllogism goes like this:

*A cat is a mammal with four legs.*

*My dog is a mammal with four legs.*

*Therefore my dog is a cat.*

In the spirit of fractured syllogisms that undercut the logic of leadership, then, I offer this syllogism of anxiety (which I heard several years ago on the British television comedy, “Yes, Prime Minister.” It goes like this:

*We must do something!*  
*This is something!*  
*Therefore we must do it!*

(Incidentally, there are exclamation marks at the end of each of those statements: We must do something! This is something! Therefore we must do it! And the exclamation points are obligatory!!!)

When it comes to the qualities of character necessary for healthy leadership, courage is a much better foundation to build on than anxiety.

Courage *en-courages*. Courage, that is, begets courage. The courage of leaders makes it possible for others in an organization to be willing to take calculated risks, to try new things, to think new thoughts.

A few years ago my wife, Deborah, and I wrote a book on leadership titled, *The Character of Leadership*, in which we argued that there are specific virtues that every good leader needs: integrity, flexibility, talent, prudence and courage. All of these virtues are grounded in the personal strength of character that is the opposite of anxiety.<sup>9</sup>

## **6. Healthy leaders plan.**

Charles Knight, in a now classic article for the *Harvard Business Review* (1992), “Emerson Electric: Consistent Profits, Consistently,” observed that as Chief Executive Officer of Emerson Electric, “more than half of his time each year [was] blocked out strictly for planning.”<sup>10</sup> Good planning, Knight explained, takes time.

One of leadership’s besetting sins is over-complexity. Good planning seeks simplicity and clarity wherever possible, and good leaders must continually be asking, “What are we trying to accomplish? Does that fit our mission? What are the necessary steps to move this organization from here to our goal? Who is responsible for what? How will we know we have accomplished what we set out to do? What are the hallmarks of success, and how will we know where we have failed?”

The key feature of planning, of course, is learning. And learning is one thing healthy leaders can’t get enough of. Every time leaders sit down to plan, they expect to learn things they did not know before. Planning, in other words, is more important than simply “the plan” you come up with in the end. In fact, good planning keeps rolling on and on, adjusting to new realities, changing course when necessary, demanding an organization to re-evaluate even its most fundamental assumptions in light of emerging evidence to the contrary. Good planning requires a sixth sense for those subtle shifts in reality, a quasi-intuitive sense that can be sharpened by practice and that can bring to leadership the richness and variety of improvisation.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Jinkins and Deborah Bradshaw Jinkins, *The Character of Leadership: Political Realism and Public Virtue in Nonprofit Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 101-138.

<sup>10</sup> Charles F. Knight, “Emerson Electric: Consistent Profits, Consistently,” *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1992, 57. -70.

Knight also observes that most companies that experience failure (and I quote): fail “primarily for non-analytical reasons: management knows what to do but, for some reason, doesn’t do it.” In other words, most companies fail because they fail to do what they know they should. Most often, they simply fail to follow-through. That is why Knight’s approach to leadership focuses on just three main points:

*Set clear targets,  
Plan carefully,  
Follow-up closely.*

It’s not uncommon to hear people distinguish between leadership and management, sometimes elevating leadership far above mere management and administration. But, anyone who hopes to be a good leader must realize that managerial competence is essential to leadership, and managerial incompetence will ultimately undermine even the most charismatic leader.

## **7. Healthy leaders embrace the wisdom of deliberation**

One of the more common myths in our society is the myth of the individual expert. The myth holds that if you want to get the right decision, the best way to do so is always to get the perspective of an expert. This myth has a corollary in the field of leadership that goes something like this: If you want good leadership, get a good, experienced leader and trust his decisions. In recent years there’s been a deluge of consultants in businesses and in churches that celebrate the role of the individual leader and pour contempt on deliberative processes, arguing that their sluggishness makes it impossible for organizations to respond to rapidly changing circumstances.

In contradiction of this new conventional wisdom, and perhaps as a response to some of the spectacularly bad leadership organizations have experienced at the hands of individuals who refused to listen to their boards and constituencies, there’s a new movement of leadership analysts who extol what has become known as “the wisdom of crowds.”

The phrase, “wisdom of crowds,” comes from James Surowiecki and the book he wrote by that title. This staff writer at *The New Yorker* drew together a variety of observations and research studies, and ultimately concluded that under the right circumstances groups consistently make better decisions than the most knowledgeable members of the group will make on their own. What are the right circumstances? Well, the two most important are diversity and independence. Surowiecki explains that “the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise.” In other words, “An intelligent group, especially when confronted with cognition problems, does not ask its members to modify their positions in order to let the group reach a decision everyone can be happy with. Instead, it figures out how to use mechanisms – like market prices, or intelligent voting systems – to aggregate and produce collective judgments that represent not what any one person in the group thinks but rather, in some sense, what

they all think. Paradoxically, the best way for a group to be smart is for each person in it to think and act as independently as possible.”<sup>11</sup>

Healthy leaders support and strengthen the processes of deliberative decision-making that exist in an organization. Unhealthy leaders undercut these processes through secret-keeping and behind-the-scenes manipulation of decision-making (whether by making deals with decision-makers, or threatening them).

Deliberative bodies (especially those which exist in a structure of checks and balances) can be frustratingly slow in coming to a decision. But, often, companies, non-profit organizations and churches need time to reflect on whether a course of action is appropriate. Anyone who has ever been part of an institution that has been railroaded into a destructive course of action by an impatient and manipulative leader will appreciate that something more than speed is at stake in healthy leadership.

## **8. Healthy leaders are never too old to learn.**

Leaders often refer to fighting “grass fires” or “wild fires” as a way of talking about dealing with certain kinds of conflicts or difficulties. A few years ago, Karl Weick decided to take this common metaphor seriously, so he began a careful study of professional wild fire fighters. His research was published under the title, “Fighting Fires in Educational Administration” in the journal *Educational Administration Quarterly* (1996).

One of the most crucial things he learned had to do with casualties. He observed that most casualties among wild fire fighters occur among two populations: those who have just started (fire fighters who are in just the first couple of years) and those who have been fighting fires for more than fifteen years. Novices, obviously, just haven’t learned enough, and may get burned. But the death of veterans is more surprising. They tend to die in fires because they think they’ve seen it all, they think that fire has nothing new to teach them.

This is a crucial insight for leaders. We all know that we’ve got a lot to learn when we’re new, whether that means we’re new to the profession, or new to a particular institution. But it’s just as important to remember that we’re never too old – or too experienced – to learn. The fires of organizational leadership always have new things to teach us.

Weick’s paper taught me two things, for example, that I try to apply. Incidentally, his paper has a whole range of ideas that any leader would benefit from understanding – I’m just looking at two of them:

- (1) According to Weick, “Effective firefighting occurs when people appreciate the complexity of small events and mobilize complex systems to sense and manage

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<sup>11</sup> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), xix-xx.

them. One of the most surprising patterns in wildland firefighting,” he says, “is that fatal forest fires are most likely to occur when conditions appear to be least lethal.” One simply “can never afford to be complacent. Alertness is your most valuable asset.”

- (2) “Effective firefighting occurs when people know what they do not know and simultaneously trust and mistrust their past experience.... The attitude of wisdom is one way to remain alert,” Weick says, “because it leads people to remain open to what is happening and to rely cautiously on their past experience.”<sup>12</sup>

It has become fashionable to tout the principle of “continuous improvement” in management, but the principle is far from simply a fad. Healthy leaders recognize that they never know enough, that there’s always room for better understanding and improvement.

## **9. Healthy leaders know what to pay attention to.**

A few years ago I was visiting with a professor who was complaining about a school president he knew. The president was a classic micromanager who spent hours doing everything from fund raising (a core responsibility of presidents) to re-arranging the brochures in the continuing education promotion display (arguably something that someone else should do).

Healthy leaders pay attention to the right things. Some details matter so much that a leader must pay attention to them, indeed some details matter more than anything else. But good leaders develop an intuition of knowing what to pay attention to, and what to leave to others.

Another colleague, Scott Cormode, director of a leadership institute at Fuller Seminary, draws an analogy between the leader’s ability to pay attention to the right things and the transition one makes from being a beginner to an experienced automobile driver. Scott observes that many accidents occur among inexperienced drivers not because they are inattentive, but because they pay attention to too much.

If you’ve ever tried to teach a young person to drive you may have noticed this phenomenon. They are distracted by an overwhelming field of sensory data: a child waiting to cross the street in front of them on her bicycle, a car behind them turning on to a side street, a woman walking her dog on the side walk, a stop sign approaching half a block ahead, the list could go on and on. An experienced driver knows what is more likely to be important information, and what is not. The car behind him is not important to notice, for example, but the child at the curb is crucial to keep your eyes on. The woman walking the dog is probably not a concern, as long as they stay on the walk, but the stop sign ahead needs preparation. The experienced driver is calculating all of this, sorting it, letting go of this data, zeroing in on that.

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Weick, “Fighting Fires in Educational Administration,” *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 1996), 568-569.

The inexperienced driver is simply overwhelmed, and often makes mistakes by over-reacting, or by freezing-up.

I've often felt that leaders need the equivalent of pilot training simulators that force us to engage in situation after situation in which all sorts of things go wrong, so that we can develop the instincts necessary to know when and how to respond in the clutch. Lacking this, it simply takes time to learn to relax at the wheel of leadership, knowing which issue requires a glance, and which will require intensive analysis, which requires action, and which requires elegant inactivity.

## **10. Healthy leaders enlist followers in change.**

Some tend to think of organizations as existing in a sort of static condition periodically interrupted by occasions when change is necessary. Nothing could be further from the truth. Change is the essential condition of all things, including organizations. Adaptation, evolution, reform, movement, sometimes imperceptible, sometimes apparent, sometimes profound, sometimes superficial, sometimes cataclysmic, but always, always at work: this is the state of all things. But there is significant difference between purposeful, strategic change, and mere movement. It makes a world of difference whether a log decays and rots in a forest, and whether that log is crafted into a canoe to paddle down a river, though both processes may leave it hollowed out. And it makes a world of difference whether that canoe is navigated through the white water of the rapids on that river, or whether it is left to drift, running against rocks and over waterfalls at the mercy of a merciless current.

Healthy leaders understand change. And one of the things they understand about change is how crucial it is for an organization to participate in institutional changes, that is, if the leadership wants the changes to stick over the long-haul.

Thirty years ago two researchers, Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, both of whom have gone on to celebrated careers in leadership, studied the management of change, and produced a classic paper under that title for a volume on organizational change and development. The paper was truly seminal in the field of organizational management, and offers far more ideas than I can summarize here, but one idea in particular strikes me as essential for everyone to know about leadership: healthy leaders use their influence and power to make sure that their organization is successful in making necessary changes, but is effective as well. Let me explain.

It is quite possible to be successful in making a change as a leader simply by requiring that the change be made – so called, management from above. Unfortunately, however, this change is unlikely to be effective, that is, its effects are likely only to be short-term, the members of the organization never having owned the change as their own.

Hersey and Blanchard describe the conditions necessary for a change to be both successful and effective. They said that instead of the leader using his or her personal power to force an organization to conform, the leader should do the following. The leader should use his or her position to help the members of the group grow in their knowledge and understanding of the situation that is calling for change. Their study and research into the situation will, then, lead to a change in attitudes among those who do the work. They will see that their own individual behavior needs to change to reflect their new understanding, and this will lead to changes in the group's behavior. Because the process moves from below, the buy-in of the organization is guaranteed, and the organization is much more likely to ensure that the change holds. The leader, however, has to be open and willing to allow the process to belong to the organization, which means the end-result, the change itself, may not be precisely what he or she originally imagined.<sup>13</sup>

Few leaders want their favorite projects to languish once they have left an organization, and fewer still want their best ideas to die on the vine. But it takes careful groundwork to make sure that ideas become realities, and it takes considerable courage to let go enough that an idea can become bigger and different from what the leader imagined.

### **A Closing Reflection**

The calling of leadership is a remarkable one. Leadership is a demanding vocation, but it is a rewarding one. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and novelist, has reflected long and hard about vocation and calling. He says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Perhaps there is nothing we need more to know than this. And so I close with a prayer that your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger may meet in those places where you lead.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, "The Management of Change," *Organizational Change and Development*, Henry Tosi and Clay Hamner (St. Clair Press, 1977), 508-509.

## Resource Guide

### Books:

- Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Harvard University Press, 1994). This is the most important book on the subject of leadership. It is the single required text for anyone who wants to be a better leader.
- James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Doubleday, 2004). A superb and stimulating recovery of the appreciation for the wisdom of deliberative bodies.
- Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break All the Rules* (Simon and Schuster, 1999). A book based on the Gallup study of over 80,000 managers in over 400 companies. This study recovers the value of good management, and corrects the foolish idea that leadership somehow does not require management skills.
- Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (Harper, 2001). The best organizational leadership book in years focusing on excellence. A far more helpful book than previous attempts to get at this elusive quality.
- Paul Hersey, *The Situational Leader* (The Center for Leadership Studies, 1984/1997). The classic rebuttal of the notion that all you need to do is “discover your own leadership style.”
- Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, second edition, 1992). Another classic. This book provides the single best resource for doing organizational archaeology, burrowing down through the artifacts of the institution through its espoused values to its basic underlying assumptions, i.e., those things that REALLY matter, that are non-negotiable, that drive and shape the organization.
- Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (Guilford 1985), and *Friedman’s Fables*, 1990). Essential reading for anyone who cares about the health of families and organizations.
- Jackson W. Carroll, *As One With Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991). This classic by one of the wisest people in theological education is about to be revised for a new edition.
- Michael Jinkins and Deborah Bradshaw Jinkins, *The Character of Leadership: Political Realism and Public Virtue in Nonprofit Organizations* (Jossey-Bass, 1998) because I haven’t yet found a better book at doing what we are doing.

### Articles:

- Charles F. Knight, “Emerson Electric: Consistent Profits, Consistently,” *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1992.
- Karl E. Weick, “Fighting Fires in Educational Administration,” *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 1996).
- Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, “The Management of Change,” *Organizational Change and Development*, Henry Tosi and Clay Hamner (St. Clair Press, 1977).

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