

“Mentoring and Modeling Leadership Character”
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Two personal vignettes frame the issues addressed in the book, *Mentoring and Modeling Leadership Character*.

Following my retirement from Mount Vernon Nazarene University, I received a very personal letter from an MVNU alumnus. After a warm greeting, he asked me a leadership question: “How do I build up the trust of the people with whom I work?”

I began to ask additional questions. How do leaders nurture the trust of those we lead? How can we develop a reputation of trustworthiness? Is there a trust gap in our work with others?

Kouzes and Posner, in their book, *Credibility*, (1993), identified four questions to help us answer these questions:

1. Is my behavior predicable or erratic?
2. Do I communicate clearly or carelessly?
3. Do I treat promises seriously or lightly?
4. Am I forthright or dishonest?

Intentionally addressing these four questions will go a long way in enhancing our reputation as someone trustworthy. “*Many people claim to be loyal, but it is hard to find a trustworthy person*” (Proverbs 20:6, NCV).

The second vignette took place in 2019. Near the conclusion of a Myanmar Evangelical Alliance day-long seminar in Yangon, Myanmar, an older Myanmar leader, working near the dangerous Myanmar/India border asked to speak. He stated, “I came to this seminar because of the subject, ‘Christian Leadership.’ I was immediately impressed by the theme of the seminar session: ‘Nurturing the Trust of Those We Lead.’”

He continued, “This is the first leadership seminar I have attended that addressed this subject. I had never considered the impact of my words and actions on the people led. “I discovered,” he concluded, that “leading others begins with leading myself.”

Following the conference, he and I pursued the question, “What is involved in first, leading ourselves?”

The Myanmar conference focused on the themes of:

- Consistency and Integrity;
- Communication and Transparency;
- Confidentiality and Courageous Conversations;

Competence and Humility; and
Caring Relationships, Discipline, and a “non-anxious” presence.

These are leadership character issues!

Character has powerful implications for Christian leaders. As leaders, we have a responsibility to be role models, to help nurture character and trust. God wants to develop Christian character qualities in the lives of the mentor and the person being mentored, so that we can participate with Him in His great mission in the world.

Modeling is the primary process by which leaders pass on the fundamental character qualities and values needed in future leaders. These qualities in our lives as leaders, or lack of them, will either confirm or deny to others what it is we want to teach them about ministry and mission.

According to Dr. Richard Leslie Parrott (2002), a person of leadership character has “a quality or pattern of behavior that distinguishes them from people who are not leaders.” He continued, “Leaders display patterns of relating and responding that influence the action of others.” He concluded, “Leadership character is the habit or pattern of behavior that provides good leadership.”

Dr. James Couchenour quotes a business associate with a plaque prominently displayed in the lobby of his office: “In the long run, only integrity matters. In fact, without integrity, there will be no long run” (Fairbanks, 2012).

In addition to integrity, scripture speaks to us regarding our character. Character is “the Aggregate of qualities that distinguish one person from another” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2020). Character springs from the core values by which we build our lives.

LEADERSHIP CHARACTER refers to the qualities that shape the leader’s motivations, responses, and moral actions in the home, on the job, and in cultural and faith communities, especially as expressed through communication, relationships, decision-making, and development of trust.

When in one’s life does the individual begin to express his or her basic faith with the Christian character qualities listed in 2 Peter 1: 5-7? “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.”

St. Peter continues, “For if you possess these qualities increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8). He admonishes us to nurture a lifelong pursuit of Christian character and integrity.

Increasingly in recent years, I became more passionate and intentional about nurturing leadership character. The book, *Mentoring and Modeling Leadership Character*, represents a more systematic presentation of the way I prayerfully mentored and modeled leadership character before those with whom I lived and led. I reflect often on how I pursued a key mentoring verse:

*“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses
entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others”
(2 Timothy 2:2).*

The chapters reflect my attempt in various settings and circumstances to mentor younger leaders and model before them in such a way that they, in turn, will mentor others. They focus on:

Asking the Right Questions;
Pursuing Character Formation;
Mentoring and Modeling Leadership Character;
Moving from Vision to Action to Results (in the midst of conflict);
Cultivating the Character Quality of Acceptance;
Watching the Words We Speak;
Dealing with a Sense of Betrayal;
Intentionally Nurturing the Christian Life;
Maturing Spiritually in a Diverse Christian Community;
Embracing Contentment;
Creating Space and Making Room;
Staying with It: The “Grace Gift” of Tenacity.

Each leadership ministry assignment comes with its own unique context of challenges and characters. Each location and responsibility led me to a different question regarding spiritual leadership. These four spiritual leadership questions remain with me to this day.

1. How can we live together within this diverse Christian community in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?
2. If, in Christ, all things are made new, then how does our relationship to Christ convert the way we live and lead in a Christian community of faith?
3. In conflict situations, when good and godly people differ and sometimes collide over vision, values, traditions, policies, and programs, how can I lead in these situations, really lead (and serve) with the mind and spirit of Christ?
4. How does my testimony of holiness of heart and life transform the way I both mentor others in the Christian faith and model before them a vibrant, maturing Christian life?

These four questions and their answers undergird and inform the central question of this book. *How does my Christian testimony transform the way I both mentor others and model before them the leadership character qualities I desire to pass on to them and see evidenced in them?*

The thesis of Chapter Three of the book is this:

For the students you recruit (or the faculty you lead), you can become leadership role models who exemplify, in word and deed, the very character qualities and values you most admire in others.

This thesis presupposes three additional questions:

Who are your leadership role models?

What are the character qualities and values you admire most in these individuals?

How do these heroes exemplify ethical behavior for you?

A corollary thesis of the Chapter is this: Modeling is a primary method or process by which leaders “pass on” the fundamental character qualities and values needed in future leaders.”

A key assumption to this chapter is this: “You are committed to recruiting and nurturing those you lead as “mentors and models to be.” In the process of your intentional efforts to mentor and model leadership character, your co-workers and colleagues with whom you work will increasingly “pass on” to others what has been modeled before them.

Chapter Three is encased in three sections:

The EVIDENCE of leading ... is in the qualitative growth of the led – as individuals and as team members.

The PURPOSE of leading ... is to nurture good and godly character in the “leaders to be.”

The PROCESS of leading ... is in modeling before our recruits (or co-workers) what we seek to pass on to them.

The question for those of us who lead others is this: *How can we lead and work with students in such a way that they grow -mature as persons-in this process?*

My understanding of leadership affirms that “Leadership begins with humble service to others to enable them, through teaching and example, to live their lives under the Lordship of Christ, to understand, accept, and fulfill their ministry to each other and their mission to the world.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) believe that “Leadership is an affair of the heart, not of the head.” They continue, “We suspect the best kept secret of successful leaders is love: being in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with those who honor the organizations by using its work. Leadership is an affair of the heart, not of

the head.”

So we come to the elephant in the room.

How do you communicate a lifestyle to future leaders?

How do you teach commitments, priorities, values, and disciplines?

How do you pass on a leadership lifestyle that reflects a passion for the qualitative growth of the led and a pursuit for character development in both the leaders and the led?

How do you teach a lifestyle?

Whatever else it means, it demands we take seriously the principle of *imitation, or modeling* before the led what we seek to pass on to them. We can show by *example* the change we desire to produce in people.

What about ourselves as leaders do we want our colleagues and co-workers to catch from us?

Servant leaders are passionate to pass on to them a *servant* spirit. And it is more *caught* than taught! More modeled than mandated! Leadership begins in the heart ... not the head!

I was asked earlier this year to write a Chapter for a book on “Christian Spirituality.” I was assigned the title, “Spirituality in Leaders.” The four sections of the final draft are:

Spirituality in Leaders ... is *rooted* in a Theological Vision;
is *nurtured* in Theological Convictions;
is *expressed* in the Theological Dynamics of Hospitality,
Acceptance, and Presence; and
is *empowered* by the Theological Motif of The Spirit of God in Us.

The third section in the Chapter speak to the “elephant” as referenced above. We model and communicate a servant leadership lifestyle through the theological dynamics of *hospitality, acceptance, and presence*.

Dynamic #1: Hospitality. The practice of hospitality was a way of life fundamental to Christian identity for seventeen hundred years of the Christian Church. Christine Pohl convincingly documents this practice in her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality in Christian Tradition*.

Hospitality primarily means the creation of free space – making room, to use Pohl’s words, in the midst of differences of thought or behaviors that may exist. With this perspective, the attitude of hospitality helps us to make room or create space for those with whom we live and work. The strange and the stranger can enter and become a friend. It is being to others with whom you live and work a *living witness of the risen Christ*.

The rich concept of spiritual hospitality in our leadership responsibilities has the potential of transforming relationships with those individuals with whom we live and work as it nurtures our own spiritual leadership.

Biblically and theologically, the term hospitality is not limited to receiving a stranger into our homes – although it surely includes this dimension. Fundamentally, it is a core attitude toward others, which can be expressed by a great variety of behaviors. Hospitality, biblically understood, challenges us to **relate to others as if we were relating to Christ Himself.**

The gift of Christian hospitality is the opportunity we provide for the colleague, co-worker, guest, stranger, family member or friend to find her or his own way. It enables us to consider an alternative way of thinking from those who may be very different from us. This gift to others invites them to contribute insights derived from these unique gifts and abilities, even in the context of differences of thought and behavior.

Dynamic #2: Acceptance – Another distinctively Christian attitude that leaders must cultivate and express as Christlike leaders is the grace-filled gift of **acceptance.**

The author of the book, *Cross Cultural Connections* wrote, “what John 3:16 is to the unbeliever, Romans 15:7 is to the believer.”¹ Romans 15:7 reads: “Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Increasingly, the embracing of acceptance and its transforming impact must identify and define us as biblical, servant leaders. It is the heart of all we are.

Acceptance is the ability to communicate value, regard, worth and respect to others. It is the ability to make people feel significant, honored, and esteemed.² This is leading with “*the mind of Christ*”³ To intentionally accept and serve others is to love them.

Acceptance of others, as defined, does not imply acceptance of their ideas or behavior. For instance, we may differ with gusto on theological issues. However, if we desire to witness the miracle of dialogue, then listening attentively to them and accepting them as persons created by God and thus worthy of our regard and respect are critical first steps toward an encounter that is transformative in the nurturing of our spiritual leadership.

Acceptance is a profound biblical principle for Christian leaders, especially when good and godly people collide over vision and values in a community of faith. When different perspectives are perceived as a threat, a defensive response is to assert one’s authority as a leader to quash any alternative perspectives. However, according to the late Dr. Harold Reed, leadership “is known by the personalities it enriches, not by those it dominates or captivates.”⁴

¹ Duane Elmer. *Cross Cultural Connections* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 93.

² Ibid., 94.

³ I Corinthians 2:16b.

⁴ Harold Reed. *The Dynamics of Leadership* (Danville, IL: The Interstate Printers and Publishers, 1982), 9.

The grace-filled acceptance of others is a core Christian leadership quality that must be cultivated and increasingly expressed. An attitude of acceptance shapes leaders and becomes a spiritual dynamic at work within us as we lead those with whom we live, work and worship.

This perspective on leadership will force some probing questions: How can *my* ministry of servant leadership enable *others* to fulfill *their* ministry to each other and *their* mission in the world? Are the people being served growing as Christians? Are they themselves becoming servants?

These are crucial concerns for leadership in the community of faith. All Christians — even those who sometimes make life difficult — are called and gifted for the ministry of Christ. Tempting as it may be, Christian leaders ought not to ignore even the most challenging people. They remain our responsibility — demanding keen insight, deep caring, and Spirit-empowered understanding. These expressions of spiritual leadership evidence the theological dynamic of *acceptance* working within us for the sake of others.

Dynamic #3: Presence – The theological dynamics of *hospitality* and *acceptance* require the leader’s *presence*.

The most important attribute of a leader is not knowledge or technique “but what the leader brings in his/her presence. And the presence he/she needs is a Non-Anxious Presence.”⁵ Caring for others is the measure of greatness, more so than decisiveness, firmness, certainty and conclusiveness in the actions of the leader.

“Caring deeply” in stress-filled moments or when good and godly people differ and even collide with the leader over vision, values, plans and programs demands that we listen intently, speak directly and caringly, and ask questions for the other person’s sake and not for our own. We are truly present, even in the quietness; and we pray honestly, openly, and confidently!

Such presence reflects spiritual leadership character. It is both caught and taught – modeled and mentored! Servant leaders who bring a non-anxious presence are nurtured both by a grace-given acceptance of others with whom we live and work and by tirelessly working at “creating space and making room” for the strange and strangers around us.

These values, rooted in our theological identity, characterize us at our best and convict us at our worst. The people with whom leaders live and work do not necessarily need from their leaders another presentation, lecture, or reprimand; rather they more often need from their leaders their *presence*.

⁵ Edwin H. Friedman. *Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix: A Failure of Nerve* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), 110.

Some insights on Christian spirituality and leadership, in light of hospitality, acceptance and presence, include:

1. Good and godly people often see things differently from the leader.
2. Many issues over which we experience conflict are based culturally, ethnically, or in the family, and are not violations of scripture.
3. Differences that divide us have the potential to alienate members of the body of Christ and to negatively impact the work of God in our communities.
4. Caring for our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ with us is to love, respect, and honor them, as God loves them.
5. Acceptance of others implies that we can learn from them.
6. We must find ways to communicate acceptance to those who have not bowed to the Lordship of Christ.

The theological dynamics of hospitality, acceptance, and presence are thus significant means to the end of mentoring and modeling leadership character in the hearts of those we lead. Moreover, these dynamics also nurture the spiritual life of us as leaders. These are not the responses that we could have, especially in times of conflict, without the grace of God already at work in our lives and continuing to work in our lives of those we lead.

In conclusion, the following seven questions have helped me in a lifelong pursuit of Christian character development. Perhaps, they will help you as you equip those for whom you are responsible.

1. Will this action strengthen me spiritually?
2. Would I want my child, my spouse, or my best friend to copy this action of mine?
3. Does this action violate a biblical principle?
4. Does this action strengthen the body of Christ?
5. Would an unbelieving friend be attracted to Christ and the Christian faith by my behavior?
6. Do my negative attitudes affect other people?
7. If this happens, what will I do to change this type of behavior in my life?

Maxwell and Dorman in their book, *Becoming a Person of Influence*⁶, stated, “many succeed momentarily by what they know, some succeed temporarily by what they do, but few succeed permanently by who they are.”

The leadership *character* qualities I desire to “pass on to others” is outlined in my “**Leadership Credo**.”⁷

⁶ L. Maxwell and J. Dorman. *Becoming a Person of Influence* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 40.

⁷ Edward LeBron Fairbanks. *Mentoring and Modeling Leadership Character* (Lakeland, FL: BoardServe LLC. 2021), 54-55.

1. *Speak Gracefully. Watch the words I speak.*

I want my words to be grace-giving, life-generating and inspiring to others and not discouraging, depressing, and draining utterances.

2. *Live Gratefully. Don't whine. Be Grateful.*

I want to be known as a person who is forever grateful, *regardless* of the situation, believing that God is in the midst of everything I do and is working to bring good in every situation.

3. *Listen Intently. Seek First to Understand.*

I want to listen to and respect the people with whom I work, to understand them – and for them to understand me – even if we do not agree with each other.

4. *Forgive Freely. A Spirit of forgiveness transforms and empowers leaders.*

I want to initiate forgiveness when I have been offended because I don't have the energy or strength to carry the heavy burden and guilt of an unforgiving spirit.

5. *Lead Decisively! Combine clear vision, deep humility and intense resolve.*

My Christian testimony is reflected in and through the way I make *and implement* decisions.

6. *Love Deeply. Value People, not Power.*

I want my relationship with others to energize them, to have a positive impact on their lives and to enable them, in some small way, to grow – become stronger – in their faith, their confidence in themselves and their competence.

7. *Pray Earnestly. Become the change that I seek in others.*

I want to pray earnestly so that in the midst of conflict between the leader and led, what happens to both of us is transformative!

I welcome your comments and questions.

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