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Leading Leaders

Know when to follow

Good leaders are good followers

Why do people follow Christian leaders? If we really understood this we would move a long way toward building up followers and becoming better leaders.

People no longer follow just anyone. A pastor can no longer say, "Follow me," and expect people to blindly obey. This is perhaps most true for someone who is working in the shadow of a strong, positional leader. It can be frustrating, and the second-in-command may feel abandoned. Unless you're the lead dog, the view seldom changes.

I often tell emerging leaders that much can be learned through a season of following. It is important to know when the best choice is actually to follow. It is a careful dance, and one that takes special measures to ensure toes are not stepped upon.

Every leader needs to know when to follow. Ministries are most effective when led by teams, rather than just one person. We cannot be good leaders unless we learn to be great followers.

Consider the example of Jesus Christ who said, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Jesus is a model of leadership. He was the leader of 12 disciples and a much greater group of followers beyond them (Luke 10:1-17). Jesus did not lead by giving out orders or by supervising. Jesus led by being a servant and serving alongside His followers.

Here are some ways leaders can learn to follow:

Become actively involved in coming alongside the team and doing real work. I have heard many co-workers jokingly remark how their pastor or the leader of the organization never really does any work. Of course they work—but the volunteers or support staff are speaking about sitting down and doing work that directly encourages them.

People want to follow a person who serves alongside and sets an example. Perhaps the Apostle Paul sums it up best, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Spiritual leadership involves humbling yourself and doing the tasks no one else wants to do. In Jesus' time, the act of washing feet was assigned to the lowest of servants.

Try asking questions of others instead of always being the one to provide answers. Look at their faces shine as you ask, "What do you think we should do?" Great leaders have many talents, but one critical skill—often unrecognized—is the ability to ask (and answer) great questions.



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Statements invite agreement or disagreement. Commands invite rebellion or submission.

How are questions different? Simple: Questions engage people. Questions can persuade a congregation, align an organization, set direction or focus attention on the things that enable people to learn.

Consciously share the power of leadership. Effective leaders are open to being influenced by their followers. This can be accomplished by thinking differently. All decisions do not have to flow through you.

You will help others to develop by redirecting them with statements such as: "Have you asked Steve what he thinks? He may have a better take on this than I."

Provide opportunities for others to lead. Sometimes leaders can be patronizing in creating so called "growth opportunities" for followers who really end up doing tasks the leaders do not want to do.

Instead, look for opportunities where you can come under their leadership. This may start by simply asking others to lead your staff or team meetings.

Help those around you share common understanding around the purpose, approach and goals of a project. I am not suggesting building consensus, but rather a mutual understanding that will allow you to make the correct decision or take the right direction. You will find your ability to empower others is greatly enhanced when you are confident they share the mission, vision and values of the organization.

If another person has the capacity to carry out the task, and if that person knows best—then follow them regardless of organizational hierarchy. Followers can have more expertise than leaders in certain situations—ministries benefit when we tap into their collective wisdom.

Leaders can learn to be good followers if they have self confidence in their calling and faith in those they lead, with a commitment to their advancement. They are not threatened by the success of others, and they pay little attention to organizational politics. Rather, they are consumed with achieving the vision. They understand that in order to do this they need followers.

What might you be able to do this coming season to become a better follower?

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