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Leadership Principles in 2 Corinthians

Gregory A. Smith

Edited in 2011 based on study conducted circa 2005

After planting the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul moved on to minister elsewhere. However, he remained in contact with the congregation and clearly viewed himself as more than a distant acquaintance. In fact, he found it necessary to engage in a protracted exchange with the church, calling its members to remedy deficiencies in belief, practice, and loyalty.

Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth provides a detailed leadership case study. This is nowhere clearer than in 2 Corinthians, where every chapter displays Paul's leadership attitudes and practices. Proceeding from the assumption that Paul's leadership is worthy of emulation, this guide summarizes his behavior under eight headings. Parenthetical references throughout the guide point to specific portions of the epistle that illustrate the principles being discussed.

Paul exerted leadership in the sphere of local churches, so it should come as no surprise that his leadership principles must be deduced from his ministry practices. However, the principles are applicable far beyond the scope of church work. Not only can they be implemented in Christian organizations other than local churches; they also embody a theory of servant leadership that can be practiced in any setting. Accordingly, this guide develops principles in function of three concentric circles:

- general leadership: principles that can be applied by servant-oriented Christians and non-Christians alike, regardless of setting
- Christian leadership: principles that can be applied in organizations that are not local churches but profess a Christian identity and mission
- spiritual leadership: principles that are most obviously applicable in the context of local church ministry

Accountability & Integrity

A Christian leader recognizes that he¹ is first accountable to God—not to his human superiors, or even to his followers. Knowing that his every action will eventually be judged, he consistently seeks to please God. Though he is sensitive to his followers' consciences, he is more motivated by reverential fear toward God (5:9-11; 8:21; 12:19).

A Christian leader must demonstrate integrity (especially toward those whom he intends to lead), his whole conduct being influenced by God's grace (1:12-14). Being conscious of his accountability to God, he renounces shameful and deceptive tactics and declares the truth plainly (4:2). From time to time he may be called on to defend the integrity of his actions (1:17ff). He is justified in defending himself against the accusation of carnal behavior (10:2ff).

¹ This guide uses masculine pronouns throughout when referring to leaders. This is an editorial convention that reflects the nature of Paul's world and avoids cumbersome attempts to achieve gender-neutral language. However, this convention is not intended to imply that women cannot, do not, or should not occupy leadership roles. From a theological perspective, it is certainly appropriate to debate potential limits on women's involvement in church leadership, but this guide does not aim to address that controversy.

A leader is not inordinately interested in his followers' approval. He demonstrates inward character rather than external appearances. In so doing he gives his followers an opportunity to take pride in him (5:12). A spiritual leader's behavior may not always be understood by his followers; in fact, it may seem less than rational. Nevertheless, he is willing to pursue such a course out of primary loyalty to God (5:13).

A leader demonstrates self-consistency. The content and tone of his written communication is congruent with his face-to-face speech (10:9-11).

Mission-Centeredness

A leader is not motivated primarily by financial gain, but by sincere devotion to a worthy cause (2:17). The leader focuses on fulfilling his mission rather than securing the "rights" of his position. Leadership often creates the potential for increased power, pay, prestige, or privilege. While it is not inherently wrong for the leader to accept any of these perks, he should not allow them to motivate his behavior. At the heart of leadership is the drive to influence others' behavior so as to accomplish mutually valued goals. The leader achieves this influence through sacrificial, loving service to his followers. Therefore, he may find it necessary to forego his rights—whether to keep his motives pure or to debunk any perception that he acts in self-interest (12:11-18).

The leader's role is to ensure that followers remain focused on the mission and message that unite them—despite their inherent propensity to distraction. The spiritual leader zealously seeks to direct his followers' attention to Jesus and the gospel (11:2-4).

Spiritual leaders are God's agents of reconciliation in the world, leading those who are separated from God to receive forgiveness and righteousness in Christ. Christian leaders who are not ministers of the gospel are nevertheless God's agents, seeking to facilitate the fulfillment of God's purposes in their respective spheres of influence (5:16-6:2).

Investment in Followers

A leader is a person of conviction—someone willing to suffer great losses while standing up for what he believes in. Consistent leadership entails hard work, sleep deprivation, personal necessity, and even forfeiture of personal safety. Furthermore, the leader bears the psychological burden of concern for his followers' welfare (11:23-27). A leader takes great pleasure when his efforts to lead others are successful—when his followers reciprocate his concern for their welfare (7:6-7).

Leadership activity can be intensely emotional. In its purest form it is motivated by love. The leader should not expect to remain aloof in the face of the joys and pains of leading and serving others (1:24-2:4; 12:20-21). To lead is to invest passionately in the lives of others. To lead is to seek others' welfare, to treat them with integrity. To lead is to become emotionally attached to others as one seeks to influence their behavior (7:2-4; 13:7-10).

A Christian leader recognizes that God has entrusted him with the task of cultivating the growth and development of his followers (10:8; 13:10). A leader communicates openly with followers, making himself known and inviting them to enter a relationship of deepening trust and intimacy. He recognizes that he cannot coerce others to follow him, but calls on them to reciprocate his behavior (6:11-13).

Accurate Self-Concept

The ability to lead is God-given. For the Christian leader, competence is not just a matter of innate gifts; rather, it is rooted in his relationship with Christ. Understanding this, the leader must avoid the pitfalls of self-centeredness and pride (3:4-6; 4:1).

A Christian leader has a proper view of his accomplishments. He understands that God is the only valid source of approbation, and hence that self-commendation is foolish (10:12, 18). He is careful not to boast of others' achievements (10:13-16). Furthermore, he recognizes that boasting must not be an expression of personal autonomy, but of gratitude toward God for His blessing of human effort (10:17).

People—not documents—are the greatest evidence of leadership. Letters of reference cannot match the credibility of a widespread reputation of effective service. Thus a competent leader does not have to draw attention to himself through artificial means (3:1-3).

A leader is not self-centered, but mission-driven. He does not seek others' praise and service, but offers himself as a servant to those whom he seeks to lead. A minister of the gospel proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord, recognizing that his own importance is far outweighed by that of the message he bears (4:5).

Weakness & Adversity

A spiritual leader is strengthened for ministry despite his personal weaknesses and adverse circumstances. In fact, it is in precisely such a context that God can receive the credit for delivering his servant (the leader). Thus, identification with Jesus' death through suffering yields a demonstration of his life-giving power in the experience of the leader—a process which ultimately engenders life among his followers (4:7-12; 13:4).

A Christian leader is transparent about his liabilities. Rather than being ashamed of his weaknesses, he takes pride in them, for he recognizes that they draw attention to God's grace in his life much more than his assets do (11:30; 12:5, 9). He has learned that his liabilities serve as platforms for Satan's destructive influence even while they are means of divine strength (12:7-10). Thus his shortcomings are the basis for humility (12:7) and delight (12:10).

A leader's suffering can prove beneficial to his followers—both directly and indirectly. He sacrifices for them (direct benefit), and as he is comforted in his distress, he becomes more capable of serving their needs in eventual times of distress (1:3-7).

A spiritual leader is able to persevere in the face of adversity—and even the prospect of death—in the hope of eventual resurrection. He recognizes that his efforts ultimately bring glory to God. He overcomes external circumstances through daily spiritual renewal. He keeps the eternal and unseen in perspective, enabling him to overlook troubles that are, by comparative standards, light and temporary (4:13-18). He longs for future redemption—being clothed with a heavenly, immortal body (5:1-8).

Ministers exercise leadership by enduring hardships, displaying virtues, employing powerful resources, and tolerating paradoxes (6:4-10).

- Hardships (vv. 4-5): general difficulties, persecution, deprivation
- Virtues (v. 6): spiritual maturity manifesting itself in moral purity and selfless behavior
- Resources (v. 7): divine truth, power, and weaponry
- Paradoxes (vv. 8-10): criticism/praise; death/life, sorrow/joy; poverty/wealth

Assertiveness & Gentleness

A leader knows how to balance gentleness and boldness. He is a peacekeeper. Not only does he seek to resolve differences between followers, he is quick to forgive those who have wronged him personally (2:5-10). Nevertheless, while he prefers to approach his followers softly, he is willing, when necessary, to act decisively in judgment against them (10:1-2; 13:2-4).

A leader leads not only by affirming what is good, but by denouncing what is bad. A spiritual leader calls his followers to separate from relationships and practices that bind them to sin and hinder their fellowship with God. One of the functions of leadership—even in secular enterprises—is that of defining the boundaries of behavior that is compatible with organizational mission; this exercise is sometimes negative. This is all the more critical where eternal matters at stake, as is the case in local churches and other organizations that have specifically Christian purposes (6:14-7:1).

A leader may behave in peculiar ways, sometimes even appearing unkind or unloving, when his followers come under negative influences (11:7-12). Seeking his followers' loyalty, he may feel compelled to distinguish his own behavior from that of his dishonest, exploitative counterparts (11:13ff).

A leader must sometimes confront his followers severely concerning their attitude and conduct. This is an emotionally charged process for both the leader and the followers—one that the leader should approach with utmost caution. A leader should avoid inflicting unnecessary pain on followers, even when they have offended him. In some cases it is acceptable (or even desirable) for the leader to address his followers in writing. This approach may mitigate the relational stress that can accompany confrontation (1:23-2:4; 10:1-2). When offered and accepted as constructive, a leader's criticism can catalyze behavioral change and relational healing. These outcomes bring great emotional relief to the leader (7:8-16; 13:7-10).

The leader is burdened by the awareness that his directives might be ignored by those who have followed him in the past (12:20-21). Where such irresponsible behavior persists after multiple warnings, the leader asserts himself in judgment—if necessary, to the point of severing the leader-follower relationship (13:1-4).

Advocacy

A leader appeals to his followers to sacrifice for a worthy cause—not by coercion, but by a number of less confrontational means (8:1-11). He calls his followers' attention to the positive examples of third parties (8:1-5, 8-9; cf. 9:2). He presents his appeals as advice rather than commands (8:10). Recognizing that his followers aspire to excellence and appreciate the value of persistence, he communicates in such terms (8:6-7, 10-11). Finally, his appeals are characterized throughout by sound reasoning.

A Christian leader appeals to believing followers on the basis of spiritual principles that are indiscernible to the natural mind. For example, he may remind them that God loves those who give generously and blesses them so that their temporal needs are met and so that they can exercise their generosity even more (9:6-11). The Christian leader may also spur believers to godly action by drawing their attention to the outcomes of their service: the meeting of tangible needs, the gratitude of those served, the rendering of glory to God, and enhanced fellowship within the body of Christ (9:11-15).

A leader expects his followers to comply with his directives within a reasonable amount of time—not immediately in the case of a significant project, but not without a timetable. During the window of opportunity the leader communicates with followers so as to spur them towards completion of their project. This approach to leadership is driven in part by concern that the followers have the proper motivation: They are to comply cheerfully rather than grudgingly (9:1-5).

Shared Responsibility

A leader takes care to balance the burdens born by his followers, calling on those whose resources are plentiful to assist those who lack them (8:13-15). In addition, a leader delegates tasks to trusted associates as the need requires (8:6, 16-24). Delegation may be used as a means of increasing accountability (8:18-21), and perhaps as a device for enhancing one's influence among followers (8:16-17, 22). When delegating leadership tasks to others, he is careful to affirm his associates' qualifications publicly and to urge followers to view the associates' actions as an extension of his own leadership (8:16-19, 22-24).