WISDOM

— IN —

LEADERSHIP

THE HOW AND WHY OF LEADING
THE PEOPLE YOU SERVE

CRAIG HAMILTON

FREE SAMPLE

REVIEW of *WISDOM IN LEADERSHIP*

" Craig Hamilton's book *Wisdom in Leadership* fills a significant and costly gap in Christian circles, and does so with verve, wit and wisdom.

Leadership and productivity geeks reading *Wisdom in Leadership* will immediately recognize in Hamilton a fellow traveller whose grasp of the field is impressive and whose judgments are judicious. Without drinking the Kool-Aid, he has critically and appreciatively mined the field's best literature and extracted the very best from it. The book serves as a brilliant readers guide to the last forty years of secular and Christian leadership publications.

On the other hand (and this is where he really does fill a gap), Hamilton manages to speak to those many people who have an allergic reaction to leadership and productivity literature. Such a reaction is understandable—often in this field, the pop-psychology is cringe, the studies unscientific, and (worst of all) the use of the Bible in the Christian literature is just terrible.

And therein lies the problem. For, the truth is, Christian leaders do actually have to run staff teams, create agendas, chair meetings, draft budgets, set visions, write job descriptions and lead organisations. We just do. And we often do it very badly. The gag reflex against the relevant literature creates a kind of paywall that means pastors and gospel workers who really do need to know this stuff just can't access it. And, as a result, badly run meetings, poorly cast visions and horribly dysfunctional teams litter the Christian landscape.

Hamilton manages to use the Bible well, reflect theologically and get the best of the relevant thought out from behind the barriers and into the hands of Christian leaders who desperately need them. This book could be a game changer for many Christian leaders and, as a result, a blessing to many churches and Christian ministries. Highly recommended. "

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It often seems like there are two ways to live when it comes to being in Christian ministry. You're either a Bible person or a leadership person. You read theology books or you read leadership books. You read books by Don Carson and John Stott or you read books by Bill Hybels and John Maxwell.

And that's a problem.

It's always felt like a problem to me because I'm a Bible guy. I've always been a doctrine guy. Let's talk about models of the atonement and *perichoresis* and *enhypostasis* and *anhypostasis* and the *ordo salutis* and all kinds of other Latin words. Let's talk about preaching and texts and contexts and subtexts. That's who I've always been, and I'm still that guy.

And yet, as a leader in different settings over the years, I observed that when groups of people get together they function in certain predictable ways. I knew it was true that I could lead a group well or I could lead a group badly. And even if I had all kinds of amazing and life-changing things to teach, and even if I explained them as clearly and persuasively as I could, I still had to help groups of people organize and achieve things.

I realized the either/or was a false choice—that all this talk about leading people well wasn't necessarily godless, faithless pragmatism. Rather, it was about living with wisdom and loving my neighbour. And both of those things are in the Bible and God seems to think they're good ideas. So I came to see that if I really wanted to be a Bible guy I probably also needed to be a leadership guy, because it's both/and.

So I set about seeing how I could be both a Bible guy *and* a leadership guy. And through that process I became convinced that it wasn't even biblical to have two separate groups that have nothing to do with each other—leadership people versus theology people—throwing rocks at each other and taking no prisoners. We need leaders who are well trained in theology and in leadership principles. To think otherwise is like asking which blade of the scissors you need the most. To do ministry well requires both.

I'm not the best theology guy in the world. And I'm not the best leadership guy in the world either. But because I am a theology guy, I know that theology people should be, and need to be, leadership people.

And that conviction is what led me to write this book.

What I noticed—both in my own church ministry and as I talked with friends from other churches—was that lots of people are frustrated by how difficult ministry is. Those who are paid full-time by churches, as well as those who are tentmakers working to support themselves and using what time they have for formal and informal ministry, find ministry hard and sometimes frustrating. Lots of people are overwhelmed by the complexity and demands of ministry and many of them struggle with the same problems I had been facing.

And those problems were actually ones that I'd brought on myself because I hadn't learned and observed how people work—individually and in groups.

Every person I spoke with was facing problems that could be solved. Their ministry responsibilities were much more difficult than they needed to be, because they themselves had made them harder. As I read, researched and reflected, I discovered that there are ways to relieve a lot of the frustrations we experience. (A lot of them, but not all of them! This book doesn't claim to unveil the 11 secret herbs and spices for ministry. There is no silver bullet and this book isn't pretending to be one.) Reading this book won't make Christian leadership easy. But it will make it easier. The strategies and principles here won't remove all frustration from Christian leadership. But they will make it less frustrating. The chapters that follow won't solve every problem. But they will help to prevent a whole

bunch of unnecessary problems from arising. And what you learn might even provide some solutions to a few of the problems that will inevitably arise in Christian leadership and which you actually do need to confront.

Christian ministry and leadership will always be hard. Sorry about that. We follow a crucified Messiah and we're to take up our cross daily as we follow him. But it can be easier.

And that conviction also led me to write this book.

I've always been a theology guy and I still am. But as I began to explore this concept of leadership I discovered what was going on theologically. I found that it all fit within a robust doctrine of creation.

God brought order out of chaos, creating a structured and predictable universe. Even after the Fall, where sin marred the once-perfect order and chaos re-entered the world, creation was still largely ordered and predictable—not perfectly ordered or predictable, but largely so.

Which meant we could look at the world and observe what was happening and figure things out. We figured out when to plant crops and when to reap them. We figured out there were bones inside us, and organs too, and we figured out how a lot of it worked. We figured out how to build things. We figured out how to do all kinds of things and how a lot of stuff worked.

And by 'we' I don't mean Christians, or even theists. I mean humans. Human beings know a lot of things, and not all of it is specially revealed in the Bible. Lots of it we discovered through observation and experiment and lots of it we discovered by accident.

We call that common grace. God gives humans talents and gifts and brains. We don't earn them; they're given to us by God and we're born with them. And when we use them we come up with things like science and art and music.

The great church father Augustine puts it like this:

> Is it not true that God spoke to Moses, and yet Moses accepted advice about guiding and governing such a great people from his father-in-law, a man actually of another race, with an abundance of foresight and an absence of pride?

He was well aware that true counsel, from whatever mind it might come, should be ascribed not to man but to the unchangeable God who is the truth.[1]

Mark Thompson is the Principal of Moore Theological College in Sydney, and his insight here is particularly clarifying:

The undoubted priority [Augustine] gives to Scripture does not result in a refusal to listen to other voices, even the voices of the pagans, when it is clear that they have helpfully observed truth in the world... all truth is God's truth.[2]

This is where we can learn from all those leadership observations. It's where we see common grace leadership at work.

By calling them 'common' I don't mean to say that they're bad. I just mean that they're not exclusively Christian ideas. They're true, but they don't carry the weight of a command from the Lord. They're not special revelations. But people have observed the mostly ordered yet still warped-by-sin creation, and they've recognized patterns and principles in how things usually work, all things being equal.

We might call this wisdom.

The world generally works a certain way. Any given group of people usually behaves in certain predictable ways. Those who have noticed and even studied these patterns have often applied them to running businesses and making money.

These principles make sense and minimize angst and frustration, and the businesses that apply them run better and more smoothly. If these leadership principles are true, then Augustine says they should be ascribed to God. All truth is God's truth.

And that conviction also led me to write this book.

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1   Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* ed. and trans. RPH Green, Clarendon, Oxford, 1995, Preface 15.
2   Michael P Jensen (ed.), *Church of the Triune God: Understanding God's work in his people today,* Aquila Press, Sydney, 2013, pp. 34-5.

I began my quest to learn more about leadership by gathering data through two means:

1. I started reading all the books I could find that I thought might help me.
2. I started consciously observing what was happening around me during meetings and when large groups gathered. Specifically, I tried to identify all of the factors that determined whether a gathering went well or whether it went badly.

The books on leadership I read by Christian authors seemed to make sensible claims. But they often made them from passages of Scripture that I was pretty sure weren't talking at all about the points these authors were making. Their observations and assertions about leadership seemed to be true, but there was a lot of proof-texting—taking Scripture verses out of context to prove the points they wanted to make.

The other books I read were from the world of business, and so most of them didn't exactly line up with how I viewed the world or what I thought I should be doing as a Christian minister. I don't think the church should be run like a business, so why would I try to make the church more like a business, or incorporate business principles into church life? Surely that would be both naïve and silly, if not dangerous and destructive. In addition, I knew from years of observation that most businesses—including those I'd worked in—are horribly mediocre. So why would I want the church to become like them? The church should, and must be, better. Leading a business well is good, and important, but how much more important is it to lead the church well? Businesses are about making money, but the church is about the glory of God and eternal destinies. Worldly wealth is fine, but it's impossible to compare it with the riches of the gospel.

And yet these books from the world of business had a lot of sensible things to say, and I could see that if I applied their common grace wisdom to the things I'd been doing—tweaking some ideas and applying others just as the authors suggested—they would solve a lot of the problems I'd been experiencing. I also saw that I'd been causing many of these problems, through either my poor people skills or my poor organizational skills. Since I was fairly good at organizing myself, for example, I'd

assumed that organizing others meant doing the same thing with more people. As we'll see later in this book, I couldn't have been more wrong.

While I knew that the church isn't a business, I also noticed that most business leadership books aren't really about business either. They're about people: how they work; how they work as individuals and in large groups; how to organize them and how to help them do their work well and better.

I also noticed that these business book-writing gurus had a lot of smart people doing a lot of observing. And they were observing as many of the factors as possible that contributed to whether something went well or went badly—which was exactly what I was trying to do. But these guys were much smarter than I am and had been doing it for so much longer than I had and were able to observe so many more people than I could.

I then realized that, since people are pretty much the same everywhere you go, these observations about how people behave should pretty much reflect how people at my church behave. The major differences I found were the explanations for *why* people behave in certain ways. While business books often assume that people are basically good, I knew that deep inside we're basically bad, cracked and broken by sin. And business authors almost always assume that the universe is a closed system, whereas I knew that the God who created it also actively sustains it.

While these books obviously have their own agendas, and the authors' world views are probably different than mine, what the books contain are in large part simply observations of reality—of how the world works and what happens in this world (whether we like it or not). Can I learn from an atheist whose book is all about how to make money and crush the competition? Well, if his observations are true then they're true—regardless of how he chooses to apply those truths, I can still learn from them and apply them to what I'm doing in the church context.

So even though I saw that some of their conclusions weren't quite right because of what I knew to be true from the gospel,[3] their observations fit within the doctrine of creation and under the category of wisdom.

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3   Some older business books, for example, give advice like 'Do not let them see you sweat' and 'Make sure you show them who's boss'. This kind of leadership advice doesn't work and doesn't fit with Jesus' model of servant-leadership.

And that conviction also led me to write this book.

I left Moore College with my theological degree ready to preach, to listen pastorally, to perform baptisms, weddings and funerals, to help people through crises, and to run some small groups along the way.

And I did all of those things with varying degrees of success and poise. But what struck me were all the other bits and pieces I was doing that, during college, it hadn't really occurred to me I would be doing. I was sitting in meetings. I was running meetings. I was working out budgets. I was recruiting people and creating teams. I was running teams. I was putting together rosters. I was being criticized, and since some of the criticisms were true I was trying to address and correct those issues as well. I was trying to change things that existed and trying to create things that had never existed.

Of course I'd been aware that these things needed to be done and I'd had a vague awareness that I'd probably need to do some of them. What surprised me was the amount of time and energy these tasks consumed. The more I did, the more I had to do. Every new relationship added additional relational needs and complexities. I'd had no idea how much of this kind of stuff I'd have to do and I didn't really know how to do any of it. And that was a problem.

I saw the people on my teams struggling with the same problems—I was expecting them to do things for which they had no training either. I needed to help them with skills I didn't have. They were creating and running teams, too, and they needed help to put it all together but I didn't have much help to offer.

And that conviction also led me to write this book.

I don't have a BA degree, much less an MBA. Now that I think about it, I don't even have a first aid certificate. (Note to self: I should probably get on to that.) What I do have is a degree in theology from Moore College in Sydney. And curiosity.

I like to know how things work—but only certain kinds of things. For example, I don't have the foggiest idea how to braid my daughter's hair.

Sometimes I watch my wife do it and I'm pretty sure it involves some kind of magic or alchemy. There are lots of things I don't know. I'm not even sure if you're supposed to take the tea bag out before you add the milk. But I'm especially curious about people and how they relate and interact.

Did you know, for example, that 25% of people believe they're in the top 1% in terms of how well they get along with others? Or that 94% of college professors in the United States believe they're doing above-average work? Ninety-four per cent! Psychologists call it 'positive illusion', and it basically means that we're absolutely horrible at self-evaluation but quite brilliant at self-delusion. That's a curious thing about people.

I'm interested in how people work, both individually and in groups. Big groups and small groups. Small groups work differently than big groups. You probably already know that, but you might never have thought about what makes them different—except that for one of them you need to put out more chairs. But that's the kind of thing that I'm curious about: how do people really work? I'm interested in people because people matter. They matter to God and they matter in a way that's different to how everything else matters. How people work and work together matters, because effective ministry hinges on people working well together.

And all of these convictions—about how much people matter, to me and to God, and about the importance of equipping ministry leaders with good theological principles *and* good leadership practices (based on principles embedded within a robust doctrine of creation)—led me to write this book.

What this book isn't

There are lots of things this book isn't. In many ways this is an obvious thing to say because this book, purely by existing as a specific entity in time and space, quite literally is not most things.

But also, as a subset of the most things that it's not, this book is not a lot of things that you might be assuming it is. For example, this book is not a theology of church and ministry and leadership—although that would be a great and useful book. (Note to self: I should probably get on to that.) This book is definitely a theological book; it's just not a theology book.

Neither is it a book detailing the seven specific steps you need to take to grow your church, or how you should structure your ministries, or what programs you should and shouldn't run at your church so you can be guaranteed explosive growth and get an agent to set you up on a speaking tour.

Neither is it a book about how you should structure your staff team, or about whether each minister should be the shepherd of a specific congregation and act more like a generalist or whether each minister should focus on one area across all congregations and act more like a specialist. That's an important question with lots of implications, and it probably has more than one answer. But that's not what this book is about.

This book is full of things that you probably know already or have heard before, as well as a few things that are so obvious you didn't think they were worth saying out loud. But I hope it also has a whole lot of things that you've never considered or noticed or that you've been vaguely aware of but haven't been able to focus on or crystallize into words. This book will help you to bring all of these concepts into focus so that you can think through them clearly and use them effectively in your ministry.

There might also be things in this book that you'd like everyone involved in ministry at your church to know and understand so you can all be on the same page. This book will help you to have conversations about things that were previously only assumed—if they were known at all. The chapters that follow will help you to train people at your church so that everyone in ministry, whether paid or unpaid, can improve and develop. This is the kind of book you could use in a staff meeting, or with a parish council, or with key leaders, or even with very new leaders.

Who is this book for?

My conviction is that everyone can get better at what they do, as long as they're willing to put in some time and effort. This book is for everyone who wants to get better at leading people and is willing to put in that time and effort.

While I do think this book will be useful for anyone who leads anything, I envision two groups of people in particular for whom this material will be helpful.

The first group includes those of you who hold secular jobs but devote much of your remaining time and energy to involvement in ministry at your church. The church doesn't pay you, but you're involved in ministry. You might lead a small group, or lead in the children's or youth ministry; you might lead as part of a team, or you might be responsible for leading a team. This book will help you to be more effective and also to understand at a deeper level the hows, and more importantly the whys, of what's happening around you and in your team. The material here will be of benefit as you lead in various ways at work and in your own family as well as in ministry.

The second group consists of those who are paid by the church to work in full-time ministry. You might be the senior minister of a church, an assistant minister, or a youth minister. You might lead a team of paid staff or a team of volunteers. All of the leadership principles in this book apply equally to leaders in big churches and leaders in small churches, to those leading paid staff and to those leading teams of enthusiastic volunteers. You don't need to wait until your team is all paid staff with business cards and corner offices to begin leading them well. In fact, you shouldn't wait. Leading well in a smaller context is just as important for the love of people and the glory of God as it is in a bigger context. Regardless of the size or location of your church or ministry, this book will help you lead people better and will also show you how to develop them as leaders.

How to make the most of this book

One way to read this book is to start at the beginning and read all the way through to the end. That wouldn't be a bad way to read it—we've been reading most books that way for a while now and it seems like it's worked out fairly well so far. The book is divided into four major sections, and there's some logic to how they unfold. Section one considers some foundational principles and boundary-markers in terms of our own convictions about what leadership is and how it fits into a broader framework. Section two looks at how we are to go about leading ourselves. Section three presses out a little more to examine how we lead people for the sake of ministry, and then section four widens the lens still further to look at how we lead ministry for the sake of people. This final section is about systems and

structures and processes and planning—all important facets of ministry that we don't always see clearly or think about intentionally because, while they're an important part of how we serve people, we work through them and usually don't notice them unless they're broken. It's the difference between being hands-on, physically caring for someone, and working out the who, what, when and how so that people are cared for. You could say it's the difference between working *in* the ministry and working *on* the ministry. Another way to make the distinction is to contrast 'vine work' and 'trellis work'.[4] If you read the book straight through from front to back, you'll follow this trajectory from leading yourself through to leading people as part of a ministry.

But you could read the book in other ways as well. For example, you could pick out the section that seems most appealing to you at the moment and read it. You might have noticed that you need to do more work in terms of 'Leading the ministry' (section four)—strategy and structures and that sort of thing—so you could start by reading that section. Or maybe you're pretty good at those things but you realize you need some help with leading people and building teams. In that case you might turn first to the third section, on 'Leading other people'. You could also begin by reading a particular chapter that deals with a specific issue you're facing or that has a title you find intriguing. Just jump in. That works too. The 'See also' part at the end of many chapters directs you to other chapters that will deepen your knowledge and understanding in related areas.

Having said that, I highly recommend that you start with section one on 'Leading foundations'. The problem with foundations is that you don't normally see them and you often forget they're there. This first section makes some of those foundational principles and assumptions explicit so that we're all on the same page. Even if you passionately want to jump into section four about 'Leading the ministry', I suggest you still start with section one because those first chapters establish the framework for everything that follows. Section one is like a lens through which to view and understand the rest of the book.

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4   See the excellent book *The Trellis and the Vine: The ministry mind-shift that changes everything* by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne (Matthias Media, Sydney, 2009).

You'll notice as you read through the book that, while every chapter contains material that will be helpful to people in all sorts of leadership positions, some chapters will be of particular interest and benefit for people who are responsible for leading a team of leaders. Those 'frontline leaders' with that type of authority and responsibility need to cultivate certain skills and take care to avoid certain traps. These chapters, marked clearly, are grouped together at the ends of the third and fourth sections (chapters 41-54 and 69-78). If you're not currently a team leader these chapters will still be beneficial for you to read and process—not only might you end up leading a team, but these chapters will also help you to understand what your leaders are seeking to do and the issues with which they're grappling. Being aware of these things will help you to serve them better and make their lives easier.

You might simply read this book yourself and implement what you think is valuable in your ministry. You might decide to buy a copy for the people you lead or for the staff you oversee. You could get a group together to read and meet up periodically to discuss what material from the book you think should be implemented and how you might go about it. You might give sections or chapters to people you want to see develop as leaders, or you might use the book as a framework for ongoing training of a parish council or a leadership team.

There are many options, but the goal is always the same: to help faithful people grow in their competence and effectiveness as they seek to love and serve the people around them to the glory of the Lord Jesus.

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Your family matters

One of the easiest ways to get a group of ministers to shift uncomfortably with guilt is to ask them how their families are coping with ministry. They will speak about the tension in their homes, the arguments, the feelings of neglect. They will speak about not being around in the evenings or on weekends.

There's no way around it: ministry is hard. And doing it full-time doesn't make it any easier. There's very little anyone can do to make it easy or to make it low-pressure or no-pressure. Ministry, like any job, has upsides and downsides and, like any job, it puts unique pressures on a family.

We all know this, but it's worth being reminded every now and then: your family matters.

Leadership and the family

Your family is one of the most important groups of people that God has given you the authority and responsibility to lead. God has given that role to you and your spouse and, if you're the husband, then God has given you the role of leader among equals.

God has given this extraordinarily important leadership role to everyone who has a family—which is a lot of people. Every husband or wife is in a God-given, God-appointed leadership position—whether or not they realize it and regardless of whether they have any leadership qualities. Some people fulfil this role better than others, but the point is that in one sense leadership isn't that special—it's an ordinary part of every family. And because it's an ordinary and very familiar part of family life we can tend to overlook our responsibilities to lead our families, especially when

there are other, larger, more demanding and public groups and activities to lead. But as leaders of ourselves and our families we need to remember the central importance of this God-given leadership role.

Your family

Having said all that, here's a truth I'm just going to dump on you: Your family isn't the most important thing in the world

I know that's a bit controversial and sounds wrong when you first hear it, but now that you've read it once and you're more prepared for it, read it again: Your family isn't the most important thing in the world. Jesus is. God's glory is. There might be a few other things that are also more important.

But the fact that something isn't the most important thing in the world doesn't make it unimportant. Some things can be extremely important without being the most important things. It's critical to be able to say that our families aren't the most important things in the world because it's critical that we see and understand the world as it really is.

What makes this whole family versus ministry issue so difficult to navigate is that the other stuff we do is so eternally important. We're trying to save people from eternal destruction. We're trying to see people grow in Christlikeness. We're trying to see the fame of God's name extend across the nations. It's all very big, very weighty stuff. And when it's all that versus family, it can be difficult to compare them.

But the problem is that we're thinking about it all wrong.

They're more important than you might think

When we conceptualize this tension in terms of ministry versus family, or even ministry on the one hand and family on the other, we're doing it wrong. Whether we mean to or not, and I suspect we don't mean to—when we put the question this way we're saying that whatever else our family is, it's not part of our ministry. The implication then is that you won't do any ministry among your family because ministry is in that other category. I don't think anyone actually thinks this, and everyone I speak

to thinks that they most definitely have a ministry to their own family. They're called to love and serve and be there for them. They're called to lead them. They're called to help them understand and trust and obey the Bible's teaching. So it doesn't make sense to frame the tension in a way that puts family and ministry in separate categories when we know they don't belong in separate categories.

My suggestion is that it's more accurate, and more helpful, to think of the whole thing as ministry. The tension we feel, then, is a tension between different ministries and responsibilities that God has given us rather than between the ministry God has given us and the family God has given us. All of it, though, is ministry.

People sometimes push back on this idea of thinking of the whole thing as ministry because they think it devalues family, treating them as just another job to do. While I understand this criticism, I wonder if it says more about the critic than it does about the idea. Because I'm not sure I think about my ministry as just a job to do. Nor do I see it as some kind of burden. There are definitely parts of the job that I like more than others and things I prefer to do over others, but my job is an extension of who I am, and so when I say that my family is part of my ministry I'm thinking of them as one of the things I love most about my job?

One great thing about conceptualizing your family as a part of your ministry is that it helps you to see them as they really are: people God has given you to love, to serve, and to help grow as disciples. And so as you think about all the people you long to see converted and passionately trusting in Jesus and walking by faith in obedience and standing up boldly for Jesus to their friends you'll include your family in that group. Your family isn't in a separate category because they're a part of all that. The whole thing is ministry.

When you finish your ministry, what will you walk into?

It's likely that you won't serve in a church forever. At some point you'll probably officially retire and the church that you've worked for, and in, and with for so long will say goodbye. The church will get a new minister and you'll go home.

Imagine for a moment that you've fast-forwarded to the end of your official ministry career. You're saying goodbye to all those people you love. You're reminiscing and hugging people. Maybe you have something in your eye and maybe you're walking around each room of the building, struggling to let go. But eventually you wave goodbye and walk out the doors of your church for the last time and you leave them behind—still in God's care, but no longer in yours. And it's over. You'll probably still be active in ministry in some way, but that time of formal leadership of a church is over and you're walking into the rest of your life.

The questions to ponder are these: What will you be walking into? Who will be there? Will you walk into the rubble and collateral damage of what was your family—after years of neglect and faithfully, like clockwork, disappointing them time after time? Will you walk into the ruins of what should have been? Or will you walk into relationships that are strong and full of love and trust and security? Once your leadership role in the church is over, your leadership role in your family will continue.

This might sound like a selfish way of thinking about it, but it's not supposed to be. Rather, it's some of the fruit and God-given reward of being faithful to your leadership role in your family.

And if this is the future you'd like, a future where you say goodbye to the church you've led and walk into the arms of the family you still lead, then you need to start leading now in a way that moves you towards that future. And no matter where you are and how close that future is, no matter how you've led your family up until now, it's not too late to make a course correction—the sooner you make it the better. Lead now in a way that will take you where you want to end up.

A new way to think about priorities: situational priorities

When you're considering how to lead your life and shoulder your responsibilities in a way that honours your family but doesn't overstate their place in the universe it's helpful to think about priorities—and even to think about how we think about priorities. Most people conceptualize their priorities as a list. Number-one priority followed by number two

priority and so on. Sometimes we even write them down to help us clarify how we'll live. A priority list might look something like this:

1. God
2. Hobbies
3. Falling over
4. Family
5. Friends
6. Ministry

You may have seen a similar list before. And this one might, shockingly, be exactly what yours would look like (if that's the case for you, the reason it's so uncannily accurate isn't particularly amazing—it's just that I asked all your friends about you). But the problem is that the list isn't very realistic. Do you really only ever see your friends when there's absolutely no possibility you could spend time investing in your family? Do you really only go to work when there's no way for you to spend time with either your family or your friends?

Or is it just that whenever there's a clash you choose your family or friends over the work you do at church? But is that really the case? Or are you sometimes away at a conference while some of your friends are seeing a movie?

But even if you were to flip friends and ministry it wouldn't be realistic—there will still be times when you won't answer a phone call or reply to an email because you're sitting around the table having dinner with friends.

The problem isn't the order of the priorities; the problem is forcing them into a list. The list format isn't helpful because it doesn't reflect how your life actually works. My suggestion is that you reframe how you think about priorities. Instead of conceptualizing them as a list, static and immovable, think of them instead like lily pads on a pond. I call this idea 'situational priorities'.

Picture a big circular pond with lily pads floating on the surface. The lily pads that are closer to the centre of the pond are more important than those nearer the edge. The centre of the pond is high priority and the edge of the pond is low priority. Now picture a big rock in the middle of

the pond that cannot be moved. That rock is God. He is the centre of your life and will always be your number-one priority. Everything you do is in relation to him—what he thinks, what he wants, what he commands.

Everything else in your life is assigned to a lily pad. One lily pad represents your immediate family, another your extended family, and another your hobbies. Maybe there's a lily pad for each different church ministry you lead or are involved in. And so on.

What happens is that, as situations and circumstances change, the lily pads float in toward the centre or out toward the edge. For example, it's Saturday afternoon and you're preaching the next day. Your wife suddenly begins screaming in agony, clutching her back. You call the ambulance and look after her. As you head to the car to follow the ambulance, you remember that you're supposed to be preaching tomorrow. You make a phone call and ask another preacher to step in for you. In this situation, the family lily pad floated in very close to the centre of the pond and the church preaching one drifted out a bit.

Or imagine another weekend where your son or daughter is playing in their football Grand Final on Saturday morning. You carefully plan your week so that the sermon is already done and Saturday morning is free. Yet, even though you've done everything you could, the weather is against you and the game is postponed until the following morning, when there will be a hundred people waiting to hear you preach the word of God. You need to preach and there's no chance of someone else covering for you. So Sunday morning the rest of the family head off to the match with the video camera, and as soon as you finish the sermon you hop in the car to cheer them on in the second half while someone locks up back at church. What just happened? In this situation, preaching floated in slightly closer to the centre than family for a brief period of time and then floated out again.

Situations almost always govern the order of our priorities. There will never be a situation where God is not the number-one priority, so he doesn't move from the centre of the pond. Everything else floats around, depending on the exact and unique circumstances of the moment.

This way of looking at priorities doesn't help you figure out what should, in any given circumstance, be the priority. You'll need the word of God and wisdom to make those determinations. And thinking about

situational priorities is a bit more complicated than the simple list. But even with the list, you need to work out what the priority is in each circumstance. While the list is a conceptual tool that makes it simpler to visualize your priorities, it can also cause you to feel guilty for no good reason—simply because you violate the artificial construction that you created. The pond is a way to conceptualize it all that allows for the ebb and flow of real circumstances.

Our families are not in competition with our ministries, neither are they entities separate from everything else. They're an important part of our ministries and it's our job to lead them lovingly and faithfully and responsibly.

Don't neglect them, but don't make them an idol either. Your family matters.

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Phrases to learn

L eadership isn't about formulas, step-by-step guides, or easy solutions. Leadership is an art form, and it's a difficult one at that. It's about who you are, being genuine, and careful planning as well as being open to crucial spontaneous moments. Which is why formulas don't always work and are more often than not unhelpful. Leadership is not just about doing the right thing. It's about doing the right thing for the right reasons in the right way at the right time.

Despite this fluidity, however, there are some critical moves that are worth scripting. One of those critical moves is a collection of key phrases that are worth memorizing and drilling over and over again so that they become natural and almost spring-loaded.

There are four phrases that most leaders find very hard to learn and then to use in natural conversation. If you can learn these four phrases, and the genuine heart that's beneath them, then you'll love people better and lead them much more effectively.

Phrase one: "I don't know"

None of us knows everything. That's obvious. But it's easy to feel that, when we're in leader-mode, it's our job to know everything. People are counting on us to know everything. They need clarity and direction. They need someone decisive. Someone they can trust.

There's some truth in all of those things—people are counting on us and they do need clarity and direction. The problem is that pretending to have clarity and direction when you don't have either doesn't provide clarity or direction. It provides the illusion of those things, and in due course that illusion will result in the reality of confusion and mistakes.

One of the most helpful things we can do for the people we lead, in those times where we don't know something, is to tell them that we don't know. Just say it. It's not as bad as you think it is. People might be a bit shocked to start with, but they'll soon get used to it.

Saying "I don't know" will give you a chance to find the answer and get smarter. "I don't know" won't be the sum of everything you say when confronted with your own ignorance. You'll also have to say, "We need to find out the answer". But you can't talk about finding the answer until you first admit that you don't know. The hard part is admitting that you don't know, but once you do that it gets easier because you'll be able to gain knowledge and explore solutions.

Phrase two: "You're better at that than I am"

As we've said, the leader doesn't need to be the most competent person in the room. You might happen to be the most competent person in the room, but it's not necessary that you are.

As soon as you realize that you're not the most competent person in the room, you need to acknowledge it—admit it to yourself and announce it to everyone else. You can still be the leader and not be the best. If someone is better than you at something then you need to unleash them, learn from them, and be careful not to restrict them.

In fact, your goal as a leader is to recruit and develop people who are better than you are. So you need to be secure enough within yourself to be able to do that. If you can only lead people who aren't as good as you are, then by definition you will always have an inferior leadership team. But if you can lead, inspire, and motivate people who are better than you are, you'll achieve far more.

Saying "you're better than me at this" requires both confidence and humility—confidence to both know and be comfortable with who you are, and humility to be able to admit it.

Phrase three: "Do you think…"

As a leader, and especially if you are *the* leader, your voice carries a lot of weight. People will listen to what you say. And they won't just listen; they'll be inclined to agree and do what you say. Or, if they don't agree, they'll at least do what you ask. This is not because what you say is good or right or wise, although it may be. They'll be inclined to agree and do it simply because you said it and you're the leader.

This situation is extremely dangerous.

This behaviour means that your team is devolving into the kind of team that implements ideas based not on their merit but rather on who proposed them. This is one of the dangers of a strong, competent leader. When your team is in danger of implementing bad ideas because the leader proposed them, it's like a car that needs a wheel alignment, constantly in jeopardy of veering off the road and crashing into a ditch. A car in need of such a repair requires constant attention just to keep it going straight, and so your team will be in constant danger of crashing itself into a ditch.

Ideas need to be implemented because they're good and because they're the best you could come up with—not because the powerful people suggested them.

Since you, as the leader, are the most powerful person in the room, your ideas will be given more credit than they deserve. You need to find a way to counterbalance that. This counterbalancing process will require a number of individual strategies that you'll need to implement rigorously. One of those strategies is prefacing your ideas with "Do you think…" By building this kind of less-than-declarative temperature into your statements you vastly increase the amount of permission you give people to disagree or refine your ideas. That simple phrase communicates to them that this isn't a statement of what we're doing but an option for us to consider.

Anything you can do to lighten the freight behind your ideas will help you and your team make better decisions. Sometimes you need to put all the weight you can behind your statements, and there's a time and a place for that. But that won't be all the time and in every place.

You need to help people recognize and distinguish between the kinds

of ideas you're putting forward. Is this a declaration of direction or an option to add to the mix?

"Do you think…" will help you do that.

Phrase four: "I'm sorry"

"I'm sorry" might be one of the hardest phrases to learn, and it might also be one of the most important.

Owning up to a mistake is hard. Owning up to a mistake when you're the leader can often be even harder. And being able to say "I'm sorry" on top of that can seem impossible.

But, as a leader, you need to model this kind of repentance. When you make a mistake, when you say or do something hurtful, whether intentionally or by accident, you need to admit it and make it right as quickly as you can. Saying "I'm sorry" is the best way to begin to do that.

You gain nothing by being a leader who refuses to apologize for causing legitimate problems or making real mistakes. You don't gain respect. Relationships aren't strengthened. Trust isn't built. Nothing good comes from refusing to apologize or from pretending nothing happened. Apologizing is the right thing to do. Even though it gets easier with practice, it will always be hard and you'll never want to do it—all the more reason to make sure you learn how to say it. Because, unfortunately, you'll probably need to say "I'm sorry" often.

See also

27. You're just the leader
29. Praise publicly
35. Everyone already knows
41. Two foundations of team-building
42. Humble and hungry
46. People deserve to know the truth
52. Give credit and take blame

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