

Leading the Church in the 21st Century

Part Three

By Aubrey Malphurs

(*Number 4, November 19, 2001*) In the *Leadership Connection*, I'm currently wrestling with the definition of a leader. All of us are most interested in being leaders and, most important, in building leaders. However, I've raised the question in earlier articles about the definition of a leader. What are we talking about? My point is that we must define what it is we're talking about to make sure that we're all on the same page.

My view is that Christian leaders are servants with the credibility and capability to influence followers in a particular context to pursue God's direction for their lives. Since this is a quarterly newsletter, I need to review what we've covered. First, I'm discussing Christian leadership in particular, not leadership in general. Christian leadership is different in several ways. Christian leaders are Christians and committed Christ followers, whose source of truth is the Bible, and who are concerned about godly character and behavior. Second, Christian leaders are servants. Scripture presents numerous metaphors for leaders. However, the two dominant metaphors are the shepherd and the servant. I've chosen to emphasize the servant image based on Matt. 20:25-28 where Jesus says that servants are givers not takers (what leaders do – they serve), they're humble not proud (how they serve), and they serve others not themselves (whom they serve). I've not used the shepherd image because the term is used in the Old and New Testaments as a synonym for a leader, and I've included the term leader in my definition already. (I could say that a Christian shepherd is a servant with the credibility...)

In this issue of the *Leadership Connection*, I want to explore the Christian leader or shepherd's credibility. I can sum up its importance in one sentence: If people don't trust you, you can't lead them! It's that simple. Those who are in positions of leadership within an organization may be able to force people to follow them against their will. But

those people won't trust them, and in the long term this only results in a win-lose situation at best or a lose-lose situation at worst.

How can leaders build credibility? How can they lead in such a way that people will trust them? Most leaders in general and pastoral leaders in particular must realize that people will not grant them trust right away (with the exception of church or parachurch planting). Usually it takes a new pastor four to five years to build sufficient trust with a congregation so that it will let the pastor actually lead it. The problem, however, is pastoral tenure – far too many pastors don't stay around long enough to win congregational trust that only makes it more difficult for the next leader. I tell my students that if they and their wives can't commit the next four to five years of their lives to their prospective churches, then they shouldn't take them.

Assuming that a couple has made that commitment, how might they build credibility over the next four to five years? My experience with churches and the Scriptures teach me that leaders develop trust through their character, competence, and the clarity of their direction.

The most important element in gaining follower credibility is godly character. Character is so important to credible leadership that Scripture instructs that high level leaders such as elders and deacons meet certain character requirements (1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1). I define character as the sum total of a person's moral qualities that reflect who he or she is and affects what he or she does. Though most leaders aren't aware of it, followers watch their every move. They want to know if this person is worthy of their trust. (This only makes good sense because ultimately trust involves the follower's giving the leader a certain amount of control over them, and that is scary at best.)

Scripture seems to address character and its effect on credibility in at least two ways. First, there are some general practices that all leaders can pursue to demonstrate good character and build trust. I covered these in the first edition of the *Leadership Connection* (cf. that article in the archives). They included such practices as doing the right and just

thing (Prov. 21:3), being authentic (Mt. 6:1-8), plus several others. Second, as mentioned above with elders and deacons, Scripture requires that some levels of leadership meet certain character requirements. Thus, the character question for any organization is, "What are the character qualifications that leaders must meet to lead at their particular level of leadership in the organization?"

Regardless of one's position, the character question for the leader is, "Do these people trust me?" To help you answer this question, you may want to download and take my male and female character audits.

Another key element in gaining follower credibility is competence. I define the leader's competence as having the necessary knowledge and skills to perform the leadership task well. The two key questions for leaders are, "What must I know" and "What must I be able to do well to lead this ministry?" In my work with churches that are struggling and in decline, I find that often their boards and staffs don't view the pastors as competent leaders. Thus, they don't trust their leadership, and they will not follow them. I have even had some pastors confess that beyond preaching and teaching the Bible, they don't know how to lead their churches in general and their boards in particular. The problem is that in most situations the boards and staffs of churches look to them for leadership in other areas such as vision casting, establishing a mission, thinking strategically, and so on. While some leaders may get this training in their preparation for ministry, most don't. Consequently, they must realize that leadership is much more than preaching and teaching the Bible (as important as that is), and they will need to pursue additional training on their own. They might accomplish this by reading books on leadership and, if possible, spending time in an internship or residency with a competent.

A third key element in gaining follower credibility is the clarity of the leader's direction. People want to know where the ministry is going, and leaders who can answer the direction question reveal that they have a clear sense of the same. However, people will not follow for long someone who doesn't know where they're going.

The two key issues in organizational direction are mission and vision, and it's the leader's responsibility to work with the ministry to clarify and cast both. I believe that the leader should have a sense of personal and organizational mission. Leaders are wise that know their personal ministry directions as based on a clear understanding of their divine designs (gifts, talents, passion, etc.). This helps them to know that they're leading in ministries where they are at their best. They're also responsible to guide the ministry in determining and articulating its mission or what it's supposed to be doing. In the church, for example, this would be the Great Commission. (Should you need help with developing an organizational vision, see my book *Developing a Dynamic Mission for Ministry*.)

In addition to the mission, leaders are wise who know their personal ministry visions. A personal ministry vision is a clear, compelling picture of what their mission will look like as God accomplishes it through their leadership. Next, the leader helps the ministry to articulate the same for the organization. (Should you need help here, see my book *Developing a Vision for Ministry in the 21st Century*.)

I repeat what I said at the beginning of this article. If people do not trust you, you can't lead them. The question you must answer is, "Do or will people trust me as a leader?" Three keys to building follower trust are godly character, ministry competence, and clarity of direction. Your leadership credibility will be in proportion to your strength in each of these areas.

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