



Developing Leaders in Organizations¹

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My theology of institutions begins with a rather Calvinistic premise: namely, it's a fallen world. My second premise on theological institutions in particular is that not one of them is destined to go to heaven intact. There's not an institution, there's not an organization, there's not a corporation that doesn't leak. In a storm any organization will take on water. Bailing is a common organizational behavior. Even moving through open water, an organization tends to take on water.

From a Christian perspective, one of the most crucial pieces, the “good stuff” of leadership—is exemplified by one person, well documented, in the Book of Acts: Barnabas the great encourager. Probably one of the most effective leaders in his time and in his way that we encounter; a facilitator of others, and a person who had many of the qualities that we would like to have in terms of being confident to move others along their development process into their roles of leadership.

Have any of you ever thought of yourselves behaving like Barnabas and being a Barnabas to someone else? Most of us are well aware that the man who became the apostle Paul was on his first encounter with the church in Jerusalem after his conversion, and after his time in the desert, following his time of rudimentary training. This man Saul was held in a great deal of suspicion, and I suspect that if you or I'd been there, we'd have helped to make it a suspicious moment, because he had quite a reputation going. He was not exactly what you'd call a “safe” character. And it was Barnabas who stood up and said, “He's all right. He's our brother.”

The church in Jerusalem later heard that the work of the Holy Spirit was really moving forward up in Antioch, so the church in Jerusalem decided they should send someone up. They sent Barnabas. By this time it was clear that Barnabas had a name. Barnabas has a kind of symbolic name, representing his character, a given name that was not his real name. He was called “Son of encourager.” We don't use “son of encourager” in the same sense today, but that was a cultural thing; and if you've selected from the Jerusalem church your great encourager, what do you suppose you intend to have happen in Antioch?

After he had checked things out in Antioch, Barnabas took it on upon himself to take a side trip to Tarsus to pick up Saul—in spite of the fears of his colleagues in Jerusalem. Barnabas, the encourager, brought Saul into Antioch to see what the Spirit of God was doing, and Saul and Barnabas stayed in touch for a while. I wonder what would have ever happened if Saul had simply been sent back to Tarsus—where at that point there was likely no support system. What would have happened to him? I wonder. Saul would probably never have become Paul. The role of encouragement is one of the most important pieces of the “good stuff” of Christian leadership.

¹ Ted Ward. Developing Leaders in Organizations. Transcription of an address, location unknown, 1970s

Another of the pieces of the “good stuff” of Christian leadership is truth itself. This was mentioned in one of your items on the list. One of the things that distresses many of us about what happens in a society such as ours is the ease with which people can get away from truth and make up their own scenarios to explain their behavior. Our God is committed to honor truth. In the matters that count before the community and before the corporate entities that we represent, our God is committed to honor truth, and it is our place to be as responsive as the Constitution of the United States asks Americans to be, and then some. I mean the American is asked by the Constitution to “speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” This is the rudimentary value of truth in the society. That’s part of the good stuff of leadership and the development of leadership: helping people become strong enough to deal with the truth.

Now that does not necessarily mean we have to be blunt, unpleasant, and constantly threatening to our colleagues; but it does mean that we have to glorify, honor, and respect truth. For instance, when a person is being honest with us, and we use that attempt at integrity simply to grab a tighter control around the person’s neck, we are probably not adequately representing the truth. When our colleagues are being truthful, we should be very cautious about being punitive. I doubt seriously that truth is encouraged by punitive, judgmental responses. In fact, when a person who has obviously played loose with truth comes voluntarily to a point of accepting responsibility for truth, I think it is incumbent upon us as Christian encouragers to so appreciate truth that we temper and tone what otherwise might be vindictive behavior.

Character is another important quality of leadership. One of the important usages of New Testament material is to examine the qualities and characteristics of persons. Consider Colossians 3. It is a great chapter if you’re involved in leadership development. The first part of the chapter is given to a lot of judgmental, negative kinds of things, but there’s a really beautiful, positive, “good stuff” part starting in Col. 3:12. “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” But those are not the qualities that mark the training of leaders within major corporations! However, I’ve worked with those fellows enough to know that they have a respect for these qualities—they just want to make sure that a person doesn’t misuse those qualities in place of some hard-headed demanding, structural direction. Christian organizations need not view these qualities as “fluff”. They are not fluff. But they do have to do with a kind of humility of character that may make it a little more difficult for us to be assertive in the same ways that the secular society expects its leaders to be assertive.

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have with one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” At this point, you might say, “But that passage wasn’t referring to an organization.” What is it referring to? It’s referring to behaviors within families or within the churches, or personal relationships. But at what point do we have the right to leave our Christian values at the doorstep when we enter into a corporate environment? That’s a dangerous way to reason. That’s a very dangerous way to reason, especially if the organizations we’re concerned about are supposedly “Christian organizations.”

I’ve worked the Christian side of the street; and I’ve worked the secular side of the street, almost equally. For 30 years I was at a secular university, but much of that time I was consulting in Christian organizations. I am here to tell you without a lot of happiness that I have found as much concern for people in the secular marketplace as I find in Christian organizations. I’m not here to start wars or stir up trouble, but I do see a few people nodding. I suspect that if any of us were asked, we could each tell some kind of a war story. I find, for example, that some Christian organizations can be absolutely

cruel to personnel in the name of the greater interest of the organization. Somehow we have to reconcile ourselves continually: the “good stuff” of character and “over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” You say, “Well that’s flowery language, but that certainly wasn’t designed for organizations.” I do not see how it is safe to exempt anything that functions within the kingdom from the qualities of the character specifications that are in this passage. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts since as members of one body you were called to peace.”

“And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach, admonish each other with all wisdom . . .” Admonishing is love. Great! But do it in “all wisdom.” How do you encourage and how do you admonish? Admonish as you sing songs, praising God, and keeping things on the joyful side, allowing people to see the rainbow through the clouds. We have no business coming down in ways that depress and frustrate people within our organizations and our responsibilities.

People talk about modeling as being one of the major ways that you help people develop leadership competency. Modeling to me is a dangerous business. We’re warned in the Scripture not to seek eagerly the office of teacher. A heavy burden that goes along with that office, because once you set yourself up as teacher, or set yourself up as a model, you become vulnerable to the criticism for any flaw, because you are not going to provide a perfect model. Most of us would be well aware of the weaknesses in ourselves if we thought of ourselves as models for others. Yet others talk glibly today about “modeling” as being the most important kind of teaching. I happen to think it’s important, but I don’t think it’s the most important. If it were, I think I would just stay home. I don’t present that pure a model. If people are only in the business of living up to the best they see in me, they are limited—much, too seriously limited.

Furthermore, there’s a whole bunch of stuff I call the “bad stuff” we have to cope with here, and the moment you raise the question of modeling, it introduces a set of concerns about the bad stuff that comes along in the leadership game. Bad stuff like power. How many of you have ever heard the phrase, “But leaders must lead!” Is that a familiar phrase? I think ultimately leaders must lead, but it raises the question of power. Many of you in this room exercise a great deal of power. Do you not? We have people carrying a lot of power responsibilities within organizations right here in this room.

Many of you have power over other people. That’s some of the bad stuff, because it’s quite clear that our Lord warns us against getting into that kind of a spot because of the responsibilities. Consider the first 12 verses of Matthew 23. Our Lord explicitly criticized the power model of leadership that seeks its own ends, that utilizes power to control the lives of others. Yet you say, “Well how do you lead?” The answer is, “You do lead.” Jesus led; Jesus had power; Jesus used power. But he used it in a remarkable way, in such a way that he disciplined, controlled, and limited the way he used his power!

What do you think the temptations were all about? Remember the temptations in the beginning of Christ’s ministry, how Satan took him to a high place and made three propositions. All the propositions deal with power. Satan acknowledged that Jesus had power. “Now here’s how I want you to use that,” Satan said. But Jesus said, in effect, “I won’t use it that way.” He didn’t say, “I haven’t got it.” Rather, “I won’t use it that way.”

See, that’s what I call the “bad stuff.” Satan introduced it to Jesus in terms of “You’ve got it and you can use it.” But Jesus’ response was, “That’s the bad stuff. I’ve got it, but I’m going to discipline how I use it.”

Pride is closely related to the abuse of power. You can't be a leader of anything without having some inclination toward pride. The way you relate to your subordinates is one way that pride gets out of hand. It is so easy for us to be threatened by our subordinates.

Another of the "bad stuff" sectors is the sort of stuff we use our position to protect. What's one of the tempting dangers in terms of protecting? We protect our pet ideas, don't we? We get our pet ideas. This is the great scheme. This is the way we're going to do it, and really solve the problem. But somebody else says, "Hey, there's a problem there with what you've just designed. It has a leak in it!" "No, no, no. Give it a chance." And we defend a pet idea even in the face of wise advice. One of the things that we do quite often with subordinates that prevents them from taking leadership responsibility is we insist on using them to help us protect pet ideas that are ultimately not all that strong.

What else do we protect in many an organization? Organizations are like institutions: very tradition oriented, and we protect tradition. One form of creativity that is very hard to take is the newcomer or the relatively junior staff person who says, "Ahem, would you mind if I tried doing this on Tuesday instead of Wednesday each week?" "No! We've always done it on Wednesday!" "But why do it on Wednesday? It'd be so much smoother to get it done on Tuesday." "Oh no. That's a tradition." There are positions we take that are deeper and more substantial and make no more sense than this silly example. One of the ways we play into the "bad stuff" of leadership is simply standing to defend unfounded tradition.

Someone in the list we made earlier talked about "valuing the goals of the organization." I hope you can differentiate between the goals of an organization and the traditions of an organization. Now indeed some of the goals themselves may be traditional, but holding traditions in place can work against relationships with subordinates, because quite often people who are lower on the totem pole have less at stake in defending the tradition.

But there's a third sector of protecting that really is the ultimate of the bad stuff of leadership, and this one is especially difficult to cope with: *Most of us are busy protecting ourselves*. Covering your tail. Making sure that if something falls, you can slide out of the way. A lot of people use their colleagues and their subordinates as part of the process by which they protect themselves.

The transition word right through here is "hope." With John Stott I believe that the Apostle Paul, were he living and writing today, would say these three remain, faith, hope, and love, but the most urgently needed in our hour is hope. That's John Stott, but I happen to think it makes sense. The Scripture emphasizing love is obviously pure and true, but these three remain, and one of these is hope. We are the people of hope. We have to deal in a world in which these components—pride, power, and protection, or protectionism—are part of the bad stuff. But we have hope because it is possible for us to come on to a category that I want to call the "tough stuff." The good stuff, the bad stuff, and the tough stuff.

The tough stuff begins with disciplined delegation. I get a little weary of the arguments about whether delegation is a good idea or not. I find that Christians, when they talk about delegation, seem to be enamored with Nehemiah as a great example of a delegator. I don't read him that way at all. Delegation is one of the toughest tasks, but it's a real task, and it has to be done as if it was a tough task to be done well.

Part of the skill in delegation is knowing exactly how much responsibility to invest in a delegated task. In other words, how much freedom to make a mistake can be handed out along with the task. An old adage found in education has something to say for managers too: "If there is no freedom to make a mistake, there is no freedom to learn." Who is being disciplined in the delegating process? The answer is both the person who is the delegator and the delegatee. There is a discipline under which both must operate. For the delegator, it is that discipline that allows freedom for another person to do this her way, his way, and even potentially do it badly. As a matter of fact, most of us don't things all that perfectly, and many of us recognize with a certain amount of humility that as recently as last week, we weren't nearly as able as we are this week. Quite possibly next week we might be even better. Part of the discipline of being a good delegator is to accept that characteristic of others as well, and somehow decide what you can live with in terms of jobs not so well done.

Another piece of the good stuff is the process of shared review and joint judgment. The classic term there is evaluation. I tend not to use it, partially because it seems to freeze up everything that happens after you've used the word. It's too mechanical, too threatening. I'd like to divide it into two parts: sharing a review and arriving jointly at a judgment. That says something about the span of control. If any one individual is trying to delegate to too many other people so that adequate time or opportunity is limited for a shared review and a joint judgment of the work that has been delegated, then that person has violated a fundamental principle of management. He or she has over-extended a proper span of control.

Any time I find a college president with seven vice-presidents, I know he or she is in trouble. When a person is over-extended, the evaluative process becomes unilateral and the judgments are made by the chief. If you really want to help people grow, there are two parts of life experience that are the most crucial to be shared: (1) the sharing of planning; and (2) the sharing of review. There's more to be learned in a planning process than there is in any kind of didactic experience about the same event.

If you want to teach a person to play a game, how do you do it? You bring them into the game and you say, "Now you do this. Now I'm going to do this, and you'll be ready to do something to your cards. Ah yes, you've got a red apple there; you can play it against this orange. Now you get 10 points. Let's go through this a time or two." In effect, you share the planning process as equals, and you take the competitive piece out, and you play the game as an experience together. Have you ever taught anybody a game that way? What's the alternative? Read them the instructions. But it doesn't work very well when you do it that way. It's slow; it's pedantic, it's isolating, and ultimately, very demoralizing.

There's a third aspect: Supportive risk-taking. I want you to focus your attention on it particularly because as I have looked at the literature that has been created for the Christian marketplace in the way of leadership, one of the most serious gaps in general has been the failure to come to grips with risk-taking. There's probably no other characteristic that is more powerful in terms of the encouragement of another to grow and develop in his or her leadership ability.

The trouble is that there are a many people with vision who don't have much capacity to take risks. It's one thing to have a vision; it's another thing to take a risk, to act on the vision. I'd like you to reflect on biblical characters who have served as leaders at God's request. Take any one you want to name, and you're looking at a risk taker. Risk-taking is easy to squelch, and I have a hunch that one of the reasons why we don't see more emergent leadership competency in Christian organizations is that we're too busy playing it safe, and there are just too many things that we believe have to be done correctly. What happens when things have to go right? I had better make the choice; I should make

the decision; I will plan the steps and see to the fulfillment of those steps. What, then, do I need helpers for? Runners. Burden-bearers. Porters. Cooks. And ultimately risk-taking gets wrapped up in too few people.

Risk-taking is the great transitional link back into the good stuff to complete our cycle. In effect, risk-taking also serves right here. Who did we start with as an encourager? Barnabas. Could you put yourself in the place of Barnabas among the Christians of Jerusalem who were afraid of Saul? How willing would you be to stand up and stick your neck out and say, "He's all right, he's our brother."

Every act of encouragement that is substantial and real involves a risk. Too many times we simply say in the unriskey moments, "Hey, great work Joel!" Well sure, everybody can see that. That takes no risk and it's no encouragement. Where Joe really needed the encouragement was a week ago when that fine job that he finally came in with looked like it was falling apart all around him. What he really needed then was a boss who came in and said, "Oh wow! I have hope; I have faith in you." To what extent do we find ways to encourage when risk is involved? This is the only way you develop leadership in others.

Once upon a time I took a risk in hiring a young man from a prominent university in California. Some of the people in our department were not thrilled about having somebody from that department, because that particular institution had a reputation for churning out people who were difficult and stuck on themselves. But I saw in this young man real potential for significant leadership in our work and in the university in general. I took a risk, hired him, and put him on our staff. Almost as soon as he arrived he managed to offend virtually everybody on my staff. My calendar began to fill up with more and more people coming to complain about him.

I brought him in on a Friday afternoon by appointment. I said, "John, I want you to know how many hours I worked this week cleaning up after you." I went through my calendar and I talked about the various kinds of problems that people were bringing to me because of their problems with him. He just sat and listened and thought he was going to get reprimanded. I said, "John, it takes a lot of my time, but I think you're worth it." We shook hands, and that was his weekend.

Next Friday I made another appointment. Again I went through my calendar. This time I said, "John, you're costing me a lot of time; I don't see any pattern of change." Then I surprised him. "John, I think you're worth it." After about the third week, John began to change just enough that my calendar began to lighten up. That week when I called him in, I said, "John, we're gaining on it. You're costing me less time, and you're worth it."

I would rather err on the side of communicating to a subordinate that though it may cost me something, I am willing to take the risk of giving him or her freedom to do the task. You don't have to pretend that all is sweetness and light. You don't avoid sharing the burdens that come to you because he or she is dragging you down. But the crucial thing is that through it all, I chose to protect *his* capacity to take risks, and if I had squelched his risk-taking capacity in order to get him to conform so that my calendar would be lighter, I would have lost the biggest risk of all—the risk of putting the job in his hands in the first place. You know, it strikes me that we wouldn't have an awfully hard time making a spiritual allegory out of this in terms of what God did when he bothered to rescue us! Consider the kind of risk that we represent to God. I know that I cost God a lot and he has to clean up after me. But I have the reassurance that I'm worth it. So I keep taking bigger and bigger risks for God. You see, God is working on me, and I suspect he's working on you. Now the question is, are we like the steward who when forgiven much turned around and stomped on the next guy down the line?

I've made my speech. I've shared with you observations about how we can put together a Christian concept of leadership. I've suggested focal points and ways in which these bridge together. I've tried to help you distinguish between the good stuff that can turn to mush, the bad things that can turn sour, and the tough stuff that is sometimes too hard to handle without work. God bless you.