

## Can I Truly Lead?

By Mike Bonem

If you have read or listened to Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, chances are good that you've heard him quote Romans 12:8 – “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: ... he who leads, with diligence” (Romans 12:6, 8, NASB) – and then exhort church leaders to lead. But does this apply to those who are not in a first chair role? Many of you have a God-given ability to lead. But you have wondered, “Am I really able to use my gift if I'm in the second chair?” The short answer is, “Yes, you can lead!” This article then focuses on the question: “How can I put my gift of leadership to use in the second chair?”

It is a question that I have wrestled with in my career. At times, I have compared myself to others – people who are more entrepreneurial or less risk-averse or quicker to act – and concluded that I am not a leader. But far more often I have found myself making the difficult, strategic decisions or leading a team to tackle a new challenge, all under the authority of a lead leader. Leadership in the second chair is different than in the first chair, but it is leadership nevertheless.

### What is Leadership?

To look more closely at this question, we should first define what a leader is. In *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*, Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus coined this classic definition: “Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right things.” Reread that statement slowly. Managers seek to complete tasks by working within the existing systems and following the rules. They tend to be reactive, responding to requests (or instructions) from their first chairs. They find satisfaction in checking things off of their “to do” list. They want to see the established processes and programs function at their very best.

Leaders are continually asking, “Are we doing the right things? What should I initiate?” The existing structures and procedures are not their primary concern; in fact, they often see these as obstacles to be modified, removed, or circumvented. “New” and “different” are the words that you hear in their speech and see in their actions.

A leader decides that the staff is not functioning effectively and initiates the restructuring, reassignment of responsibilities, or personnel changes that are needed. A manager wants to clarify the lines and boxes on the organization chart or define the systems for performance evaluation. A leader insists on finding creative ways to fund new ministries, and a manager wants to know how the budget will be affected. A leader overhauls the Bible study program to provide deeper community and discipleship, while a manager focuses on training teachers and assigning people to groups.

These examples are not an assessment of the relative importance of leaders and managers – both are critical to the success of the organization. Leaders are often great at initiating and terrible at implementing. Managers can take care of all the “nuts and bolts” but may miss the bigger picture that answers “why we're doing this.”

Furthermore, Bennis' and Nanus' leader/manager definition can create a false dichotomy. While temperament or gifting may make some more inclined to lead and others more comfortable when managing, most have learned to do both. You may have strong leadership gifts that you are unable to use at times. Or you may excel at doing the managerial types of activities – creating structure and completing tasks – but are called upon to do more than this in certain instances. If you have never wanted to step out and lead, this article may not be for you. But for the majority of you who have had the urge or felt the need to boldly lead (at least once), read on.

## **A Second Chair Reality: Leadership Constrained**

Effective second chair leadership goes beyond your personality. The personality, gifts, and leadership style of your first chair, along with the environment in which you serve, are even bigger determinants of when and how you should lead. Many second chair leaders – vocational and volunteer – have strong leadership gifts. But they need to use these gifts within the framework and boundaries that are established by their organization and its first chair leader. In other words, you will need to adapt in order to serve and lead effectively in your second chair role.

In *Leading from the Second Chair*, Roger Patterson and I devote an entire chapter to the subject of “crossing the line.” We describe the invisible boundary lines that define the roles and expectations for second chair leaders. Job descriptions are one aspect of the boundary lines, but they are insufficient. For example, one executive pastor may only need to report a high level summary of the church's financial picture, while another may need to justify every expenditure over a certain threshold. The nuances of working relationships, communication, and knowing when permission is required are the reality of a second chair's boundary lines.

Each second chair role has its own unique “lines.” We tend to focus on the first chair as the main “line setter.” He or she will have a certain leadership style that is more or less controlling, more or less trusting, more or less involved. But don't stop at the first chair in thinking about these constraints. The culture and history of the organization where you serve can also introduce significant limitations. A church that has a history of budget overruns or financial mismanagement may tie the administrator's hands. A congregation that has suffered from poor design and implementation of new programs may insist on a methodical, committee-led approach for future initiatives.

Your lead leader and the organization's culture can both create constraints, and so can you. If you are perceived as deficient in a particular area, boundaries may be put in place to prevent your weakness from hurting the organization. If you are a poor organizer, you may be required to review your plans in detail before you proceed. If you tend to lose patience with others, you may not be allowed to facilitate important meetings. Whatever the cause, constraints are simply a reality of the second chair. You must recognize them, or they will trip you up. But having recognized them, you must also lead within your boundaries.

## **Flexibility is the Key**

Think back to the leader-manager definition. This definition does not represent two exclusive styles, but instead is a continuum. Some people are more “leader-like” and others more

“manager-like.” Most fall at various points between these two extremes. Truly effective second chair leaders are flexible, varying their approach along this continuum. They recognize that some situations are not conducive to them taking a strong position of leadership. They may still have substantial responsibility, but their duty is to implement (manage) a decision that has already been made. In other instances the first chair and the organization may need and expect a second chair to truly lead.

If you have tried to lead, only to be kept on a very “short leash,” don’t give up. Some first chairs are determined to micro-manage every decision and program, but most want their second chairs to share the leadership burden. Can you identify the areas in which you are allowed, or even expected, to lead? Once you identify them, then lead boldly! Too many second chairs are like the third servant in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14ff). They have opportunities to use their gifts, but they bury them rather than investing them. The way to lead boldly will differ for each situation and each person, but consider these common elements of effective leadership:

- Do the right thing by knowing the right thing. Bennis and Nanus are right – leaders do the right thing. They don’t let popularity or political expediency dictate their actions, but instead are motivated by a strong conviction of what needs to be done. In some cases, they know the right thing intuitively and in some cases they know because they have “done the analysis.” Making the right decision does not mean making a solo decision. You should develop a network of trusted advisors with different skills and perspectives and make a regular habit of using them. In a congregation, these may be other staff members and lay leaders. Give them a meaningful voice as you seek to determine the best course of action and a role in implementing it. Are you constantly asking, “What is the right thing to do?”
- Demonstrate a bias toward action. In any important decision, there is a time for evaluating and discussing. Leaders don’t let this become the “paralysis of analysis.” They know that any decision carries a risk of failure and that it is always possible to seek more information, but they don’t let this uncertainty bog them down. When the time is right, they make the decisions and move the organization forward. They are willing to try something, fail, make adjustments, and try again. People say of them, “When \_\_\_\_\_ gets involved, things start to happen.” Do you know of something that you need to initiate? What keeps you from moving forward with it?
- Be driven by a strong internal compass. The actions and initiatives of effective leaders are not rash or arbitrary, but are guided by a clear sense of where the organization needs to go. They see and understand the broader picture and make sure that their efforts support this. Their internal compass is also guided by a passion for excellence. They are determined to give their best effort to any undertaking and motivate others to do the same. The reluctance of some first chairs to give more freedom to their subordinates is related to breakdowns in these areas. A person who makes decisions based on self-interest or the “squeaky wheel” of a special interest group can’t be trusted with a major responsibility. One who seems to make a half-hearted effort or to accept mediocrity from others cannot be left unsupervised. Is your internal compass well calibrated?

## **Glimpses of Second Chair Leadership**

How can you “lead with diligence”? What does this second chair leadership look like when it is put into practice?

My earliest lessons in second chair leadership came in the business world. I had been hired into a marketing and strategic planning role in a mid-sized company, but after just six months I was asked to run a struggling division that accounted for one-third of the business. I kept the company president (my first chair) informed at each step in this turnaround, consulting closely with him on major decisions, but it was clear that I was expected to chart the future course for this part of the business. This required a quick but accurate assessment of the cause of the problems. It called for me to make many difficult decisions, releasing some employees and changing the roles of others. In the midst of this tense and demoralizing environment, I needed to rebuild a team and maintain a strong focus on the bottom-line profitability. And just as the division was turning the corner, the entire company was sold and I was out of a job. It was not an easy or fun season of life, but it was a time of learning and growth.

Several years later, when I joined the staff of West University Baptist Church, my primary responsibility was the adult Bible study ministry. This large program had many good people in key roles, but it lacked leadership and direction. At first I was hesitant to make any changes, but as my influence grew and my understanding of our needs became clearer, my ability to lead also expanded. We added new classes, launched several initiatives to strengthen the program, and recruited many new teachers and class directors. Some of the changes worked well, and others fell short of our goals, forcing us to learn and make corrections. I worked closely with our senior pastor, but felt a growing freedom to shape the program with each passing month. God has blessed and guided us in this process as we have seen tremendous fruit for our church and the Kingdom through this ministry.

How should second chairs apply the “lead with diligence” instruction of Romans 12:8? They begin by knowing when to lead. If you don’t have a clear understanding of the boundary lines for your ministry, it is reckless to finish this article and charge out to “do something.” As you truly understand these lines, you will also learn that flexibility is one of the most important tools in your kit. A flexible approach (and attitude) enables you to follow explicit directions in some cases and to lead cautiously in others. And when the time is right, you will also see that second chairs can lead at full throttle. Be prepared to make the most of these organization-shaping opportunities when they do arise. Be a diligent leader – one who practices discernment, adaptability, and boldness – and you will discover new and powerful ways to be used by God.