

Three Paradoxes for Every Second Chair Leader

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August, 2005

Why did you take the time to download this article? Most likely it is because you desire to improve your capacity to lead effectively in God's Kingdom. Just like the first and second stewards in the parable of the talents, you long to hear your Master say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21a, *NIV*). We also identify with this parable and long to hear our Master say, "Well done!" It is in that spirit that we introduce a topic that has been missing from the recent boom in leadership resources for the church. It addresses those who serve, lead, and love in an effort to expand the Kingdom of God, but do so in a subordinate role. Our new book, *Leading from the Second Chair: Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your Role, and Realizing Your Dreams*, explores the nuances of leadership when you are not the lead leader. It identifies three apparent paradoxes that capture the tension and opportunities of this unique role.

What is a Second Chair Leader?

When an organization, especially the local church, has competent and capable second chair leaders, it can truly be released to reach its redemptive potential. To achieve this, second chair leaders must master the dynamics of leading and following each and every day, improving their ministry and influencing those with whom they serve. Hence our definition: **a second chair leader is a person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout an organization.**

This definition highlights a number of factors that every second chair must recognize. A second chair leader is:

- **Subordinate** – not the lead leader, but a follower and a leader.
- **A person of influence** – his or her leadership is not based primarily on position.
- **Adding value throughout the organization** – he or she has the big picture of the ministry in mind, and is repeatedly willing to do what it takes to strengthen the larger organization.

Effective second chair leaders think, lead, and shepherd beyond the parameters of their own ministry. They think of the whole, care for the whole, and seek to enhance the whole. Second chair leaders are expected to be bold initiators and faithful followers, creative thinkers and detailed implementers. The ongoing challenge is to do a wide variety of tasks and do them well. Being called upon to wear so many hats can be perplexing and stressful.

Three Paradoxes in the Second Chair

In fact, it is these challenges that we refer to as the apparent paradoxes of second chair leadership. We label them as subordinate-leader, deep-wide, and contentment-dreaming. They are paradoxes because at first glance they seem to be mutually exclusive. But our contention is that these pairs do not represent "either/or" choices. Rather, effective second chair leaders need to live within each of these paradoxes and master both ends of the spectrum. Some may

experience the tension of one paradox more intensely than another, but all three paradoxes are woven into the fabric of being a second chair leader.

The first paradox is that of **subordinate-leader**. For many of us, our mental model of leadership involves having complete freedom to set direction and determine actions for ourselves and the organization without any “interference” from a supervisor. From this perspective, any submission to another person is less “leader-like.” Effective second chair leaders do not have this sort of zero-sum view of organizational responsibility. They know that two heads are better than one and that the first chair is not an adversary. They are able to lead without being at the top of the pyramid. Most importantly, they understand that their authority and their effectiveness as a second chair stems from a healthy, subordinate relationship with their first chair.

If this is true, then wouldn't it be wise to take a long look at your relationship with your first chair leader? Spend a few minutes honestly evaluating your relationship with the authority that God has placed in your life.

- How would you describe your relationship with your first chair?
- Are you seen as loyal or as trying to capture a separate following in competition with your first chair?
- In moments of disagreement, are you respectful and humble in your verbal and nonverbal communication? Or are you aggressive and insubordinate with your words and body language?
- Does your first chair leader demonstrate confidence and trust by continually giving you additional responsibility?
- Be honest with yourself: What have you sown in this relationship? What are you reaping as a result?

The second challenge is abbreviated as the **deep-wide** paradox. Second chair leaders have specific roles that are narrower and deeper in scope than those of the first chair, and yet they need to have a broad, organization-wide perspective. Some of those who struggle with this paradox resent the restrictions of their role as being too narrow or they see the more detailed “dirty work” as being beneath themselves. At the other extreme, some excel at their specific tasks but fail to see the “big picture.” If an issue arises, they always see it from the viewpoint of how it will affect their ministry. Narrow leaders may have trouble negotiating the informal relational networks that are leveraged by second chair leaders who seek to have a broader impact on the organization. Effective second chair leaders develop the skills to be both deep and wide.

By temperament and experience, most leaders tend to be either deep or wide. What is your tendency? Reflect on how you might grow in the deep-wide paradox:

- How well do you see the big picture? Do you see how each component fits together, affects the others, and adds value to the overall organization?
- Do you stay on your own “turf,” or do you help others care for theirs? Have you recently offered help to a colleague or volunteer in an effort to serve them?
- Are you willing to share your resources for the good of the overall entity?
- Do your colleagues see you as a team player? Why or why not?
- Do you identify “gaps” that seem to fall between the departmental boundaries? Do you proactively find ways to address these issues?

The final paradox is described by the tension of **contentment-dreaming**. Being the second chair does not mean giving up on individual or corporate dreams. But dreams cannot be allowed to become short-sighted ambition, nor can they be positioned in competition with the plans of the first chair. Second chair leaders intentionally seek to shape the organization's direction and to mesh their individual dreams with the corporate vision. They understand that an apparent detour from their dreams may be short-term and may even be a catalyst to fulfilling their God-given potential. Successful second chair leaders are able to maintain contentment with the present without losing their sense of God-given calling for their future.

This often is the most challenging paradox for second chair leaders because it goes right to their hearts. Leading from the second chair is not always easy, especially if you have been called to lead from the first chair; or if your vision for the church is miles apart from that of your first chair leader. Yet, the reality is that God often leaves you right where you are, instead of where you want to go. So, what do you do with the tension of contentment and dreaming?

- Can you clearly articulate the dream God has placed in your heart? Have you put it in writing? (If not, take some time to write it down.)
- How is your current role shaping you to fulfill your dreams? Do you see this time as a season of development and maturation?
- How can you be the best steward of this season of your ministry?
- To get the most out of your current situation, what do you need to wrestle with and find contentment in? What is the most biblical and holy way to do that?

What Now?

Begin by serving! Do so with humility, joy, and commitment wherever God has placed you. Understand that God has a great plan for your life. His timing is perfect – He wants to accomplish His purpose for today in your life today. To lead in His vast kingdom, you must become last and least. To be an effective second chair leader, you must serve! The exciting thing about this role is that it clearly depends on relationship and not position. Our definition includes anyone who is not the lead leader and has a passion for excellence for the entire organization. It calls a leader to be a person of influence and credibility.

How much credibility and influence do you have with the people who are affected by your ministry, including your senior leader, your co-workers, and the volunteers with whom you serve? Without credibility in their eyes, you will not have influence. Building credibility requires patience, consistency, and persistence. It requires a spirit of teamwork and cooperation. Building credibility and influence requires that you put the prestige of your position aside and pick up the towel of service. You must commit to serving your entire organization well, each and every day. Then, and only then, will your peers, subordinates, and senior leader truly allow you to lead from the second chair.