

Seven Questions Every Leader Should Ask

The answers can keep your leadership on track.

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My first "official" leadership position forayed into a conflict I'll never forget. At about age 16, I wrote and directed a play produced by my church's youth group. On the Saturday before a Sunday evening performance to our small congregation, the thespian-type teenagers among us met at church for an overdue rehearsal.

Despite our eleventh-hour gathering, the rehearsal progressed smoothly—until I decided the play would fare better if we performed in the basement instead of the sanctuary. (I've forgotten why I considered this a clever idea.) Not many agreed, but as their leader I thought this meant we did things my way, so cast members begrudgingly hauled our homespun props downstairs, including a couch that barely passed through a narrow stairwell.

Minutes later, I decided the basement wasn't the right place after all. Okay, let's move things back upstairs, I announced. My decision instigated a fallout. The guys felt especially annoyed because they'd hauled the heavy stuff. (I prefer to think I prepared those young men for marriage, but even today they probably wouldn't think that's funny.)

The final blow occurred when halfway up the stairs, the couch got stuck on the railings. Really stuck. My last memory of this production is me standing on one side of the lodged couch and an angry male on the other side, glowering at each other.

Though I don't recall how we resolved the dilemma, I still remember how excruciating it felt to make a mistake that negatively affected the people I led. I wish this early episode had ended my leadership mess-ups, but in reality it ignited years of learning the hard way about leading others.

Today I know that if something runs amok in my relationship with a group, I need to stop momentarily and review some leadership basics. The following questions help me evaluate and keep my leadership on track. And if you have a proverbial

couch stuck in the stairwell (or even if you don't) these questions could strengthen your leadership effectiveness, too.

1. Do I have good reason to lead?

The reasons we lead affect the spiritual and relational health of a group. But what are appropriate reasons to lead? There certainly are more reasons than the following list, but these constitute some reliable basics.

- *A sense of God's calling.* When we know God has called us to lead, it provides an underlying security that girds us through the task's difficulties. Because we interact personally with the Creator, the way we sense His calling varies from individual to individual, but often we feel a tug within that's confirmed by Scripture and external circumstances. Whatever our process, pinpointing God's call means spending time alone with Him. Then we can hear Him say, "This is the way; walk in it" (Is. 30:21).
- *A passion for the purpose.* When it's a group, project, or purpose we're passionate about, this compulsion could indicate that God has prepared us for the leadership role. However, we also need enthusiastic followers, so this passion should be backed up by the agreement of group members and those in authority. When we're right for the leadership position, this becomes a natural rather than a forced appointment to most everyone concerned.
- *Fitting the role.* Are you a captivating speaker and this leadership position requires addressing large audiences? Are you a gentle listener and this small group is working toward compassionate healing? Do you enjoy teaching and the Sunday school class needs someone who has studied Romans, your favorite book of the Bible? When we "just happen" to possess the talents, spiritual gifts, or experience that meets a group's needs, it could usher us into the leadership role. But again, our spirits need to say "amen" to the rightness of the position for us.
- *Confirmation from others.* When we're uncertain about leading, God can confirm His desire through others. Sometimes friends, family, co-workers, or authority figures can perceive our leadership abilities before—or more clearly—than we can. If we repeatedly hear comments about our leadership abilities or potential, it could be time to listen. Maybe it's also time to begin leading.

2. Do I harbor selfish motives?

There are also inappropriate motivations for leading a group. If we're motivated by these goals, we're headed for dissatisfaction and hardship in leadership, even

if we're called and confirmed to a particular position. Followers sense a leader's selfish motivations and resist them.

- *Self-esteem.* Sometimes accepting a leadership position can be our way of proclaiming, "You like me. You really like me!" But when we use leadership to bolster our sagging self-esteem, we create a dysfunctional dynamic, focused on sidestepping the leader's insecurities rather than meeting the group members' needs. Though they care about people, effective leaders base their significance on God's acceptance of them, not on the wavering opinions of humans.

- *Recognition.* It's possible to love leadership because we want recognition as a great person, employee, church member, industry innovator, or whatever. We crave the awards, compliments, and additions to our résumés. But the artist Andy Warhol was right: fame only lasts about 15 minutes, and leadership based on recognition loses its staying power when nobody's noticing what we do. The Bible instructs us to work and serve heartily as unto the Lord. He offers recognition that's satisfying and enduring: an inheritance in heaven (Col. 3:23–24).

- *Power.* When we privately relish being in charge of others—having them do what we tell them—we're standing on shaky ground. As leaders, we're to serve as God's conduit, letting His supernatural power flow into the group and change people's lives. Capitalizing on our own power, then, is something akin to playing God. Enough said.

3. Do I follow God's guidance?

It's possible to be called by God to leadership, to begin for the right reasons and with godly motivations, but to wind up disobeying the Lord's guidance for the group.

Following God's instructions, the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel, but the young ruler disobeyed God's commands on several occasions. (His story unfolds in 1 Samuel 9–31.) Consequently, God eventually removed Saul as king.

When Samuel chastised Saul for his disobedience, he presented a sobering lesson for leaders of future generations. "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord?" he asked the king rhetorically. "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22).

The good news is that God can forgive and redeem any situation. If we've disobeyed His directives, we can repent and, with humility and sincerity, get ourselves and the group back on track.

4. Am I actually leading?

During World War II, critics praised Winston Churchill as a magnificent war leader, but felt he failed to provide England with the spiritual guidance it needed. Upon hearing this criticism, Churchill retorted, "Since I became prime minister, I have appointed no fewer than six new bishops. What more do they want?"

Churchill's reply exposes a mistake that leaders can make. We think if we provide the sufficient tools, methods, and personnel for a group task, we've done our job. But this is management, not leadership. What's the difference? Managers hover over details, ensuring that operations run smoothly; leaders provide the direction and motivation to pursue an overall mission.

We need both managers and leaders to propel a group or project, but it's the leadership role that often gets neglected. Our culture admires people who "get things done," and managing produces immediate concrete results. Leading operates more in the futuristic world of ideas, strategies, and inspiration.

But people want much more than the assurance of a smoothly running program. They look to leaders to guide, inspire, challenge, and motivate them. Whether it's in a church, small group, or corporation—and whether or not they articulate their inner needs—people want to follow leaders who emanate spiritual direction and touch their souls. If we find ourselves mired in management and minimizing leadership, it's time to assess who or what needs to change.

Operating at their peak effectiveness, groups often designate one person for the leadership tasks and another for the managerial duties. I did this for a Bible study group and it saved everybody's sanity, particularly my own. A woman gifted in administration took over the preparation and follow-up for our meetings (phone calls, refreshments, collecting money, etc.). This released me to spend time studying and praying before a meeting and concentrating on the group's interaction at the meeting. Essentially, we both did what we do best, and the group thanked us for it.

Sometimes, though, it's not possible to divide the responsibilities. Growing up, I attended a small church where the resources were so limited that members accepted leadership positions out of necessity, even though they weren't gifted or qualified for these jobs. If we're backed into this corner with no way out, we can ask a qualified person outside the group to mentor us through the leadership process. And pray for someone with true leadership abilities to eventually take the group.

5. Who's really in control?

Even when we're called and gifted to lead, we can forget who ultimately controls a group's progress. It's not the leader or the team members; it's God's Spirit working within hearts. When we embrace this fact, leadership grows much easier and stays on track. We realize that sometimes the wisest tactic is to get out of the Holy Spirit's way.

It's taken me years to understand this, and I'll always need to remind myself to trust God's control instead of my abilities, knowledge, or preparation. In the past I have mistakenly believed that in a well-functioning group, all members travel the same wavelength of thought and action. Translated, this means I wasted loads of time manipulating team members to think like me and do what I felt best for them.

Confessing this former mindset embarrasses me, but maybe my admission will help other leaders avoid this trap. It took hardship and a couple of staff resignations to wake me up to what the team already knew. Though gifted with leadership abilities, I used them to control people, and it produced misery.

When we're trusting our control instead of God's sovereignty over a group, once again the first step to recovery is repentance. Then, it's eye-opening to study the gospels and learn from Christ's leadership. In Lk. 22:26, Jesus told His followers, "Let . . . him who is the chief and leader [become] as one who serves" (Amplified Bible). When we realize we're working for the group, rather than the group working for us, we tap into a dimension of leadership that is spiritually powerful.

A spiritually powerful servant-leader sincerely listens to team members, strives to meet their needs instead of a personal agenda, admits to and corrects mistakes, builds an interactive team, gives away power and responsibility, and seeks God's direction for the group.

Max DePree is a Christian and the chairman and CEO of Herman Miller, Inc., the furniture maker once named among *Fortune* magazine's 10 best managed and most innovative companies. In his book, *Leadership Is an Art*, he answers the question, "What is leadership?" with this definition: "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor."

6. What's the vision?

The Bible says that without a vision, the people perish (Prov. 29:18). No matter how small or informal a group, it needs a vision or mission for (1) what it can accomplish and (2) the results of this accomplishment. For example, a recovery group's vision could be "to become more emotionally whole as individuals so we can serve God more wholly." A Bible study's mission might be "to study biblical

examples of evangelism to help us begin introducing people to Christ." Note that a group's vision isn't just directed inwardly; it results in reaching out to others in a God-inspired way.

The leadership role—and consequently the group—runs awry when there's no original vision or when, due to busyness or laziness, people lose sight of the once-articulated vision. It's essential for a leader to take time, with Bible and journal in hand, to review the vision and dream about how to keep it alive, appealing, relevant, and in synch with God's design for the group.

By way of example, I point to The Summit Group, a North American network of women who lead ministries for Christian and spiritually seeking working women. This group's mission is to encourage and strengthen these leaders so they can reach women for Christ.

Facilitating a team of leaders is no small challenge, especially when they're scattered around two countries and meet formally only once a year. Enter Patty Burgin. By phone, fax, e-mail, letters, and annual meetings, she keeps The Summit Group growing, connected, and encouraged in their roles as leaders. When I first met Patty, I assumed she'd possess the definitive overpowering personality. Refreshingly, that's not the case.

Patty quietly and confidently guides the group based on an inner strength born from continuously thinking, learning, praying, and dreaming about the group's progress. From this thoughtful foundation, she listens carefully to its members and periodically reminds them of the group's purpose and vision. This way, she enjoys the group's trust and respect, and keeps the group—and her leadership role—on track.

7. What's the goal?

"Empowerment" is a current buzzword that makes Christians uneasy because some people teach it as a means of self-gratification. But when placed in the context of leadership, it describes the end goal of a leader. To empower people is to equip them to be effective. Christ prepared the disciples for life without Him; Paul instructed Timothy how to live as a Christian and a spiritual leader.

Instead of creating dependency, leadership that's on track empowers people to learn, grow, think for themselves, and discover their own solutions within biblical parameters. To empower means to guide instead of control, to applaud the desired end result instead of nitpicking at the process, to care about the group's growth and maturity instead of our reputation, to abolish legalistic or politically motivated relationships.

Empowering leaders step back and allow group members to explore, make mistakes, take on responsibility, and move on when they've outgrown the boundaries of the team and its mission. In turn, because they make a difference in the world, spiritually empowered people stand as tributes to their former leaders. But most of all, empowered people can point others to God.

In *The Best of Ted Engstrom*, leadership expert Ted Engstrom says a true leader creates "an initial stirring that causes people and an organization to use their best abilities to accomplish a desired end." I can't think of anything more satisfying, more eternally rewarding, than making God the desired end of people's hearts.

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