Leadership's Seven Greatest Challenges

By Jim Abrahamson

Introduction

How do you recognize a leader? Recognizing a leader is not that hard. Just look and see if anyone is following. If you are alone, you are NOT a leader because a leader is someone who has followers. This is critical because it dictates a big part of what effective leaders must be able to do - lead.

What I am going to say in this article comes not from reading a ton of books on leadership or attending an number of seminars on the subject. The ideas come from my 30 years of pastoral experience in a start up church that grew to be very large. Much of what I talk about here has come from my failures as much as my successes. I would like to say that I have practiced and modeled each of these principles but I have not. I am however a learner and a teacher. I am forever observing, analyzing, and auditing life—starting with my own.

I want to suggest that effective leaders have to be able to face and manage seven challenges in their relationship with followers. First they must know how to manage **Vision** so people know where they are going. Second, they must know how to manage **Relationships** so people can work together. Thirdly, they must be able to manage **Fear** so people can take risks in venturing into new territory. Fourth, they must be able to manage **Conflict** so communities will not be paralyzed by differences. Fifth, they must manage **Failure and Success** so that people will endure through thick and thin. Sixth, they must manage **Change** so that they will continue to be fruitful and effective over the long haul. And finally, they must manage their own **Soul**. A leader must know himself, accept himself, forget about himself, and give himself. Knowing and accepting the true self is not easy but it is foundational to being able to forget about self and give self.

Peter Drucker tells us that "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." When I say that leaders must be able to manage - I am not saying that they need to be skilled managers in the sense that Drucker is using the term. Every organization needs good managers but people with management skills are not often great leaders. On the other hand, there are some things that only leaders can manage.

#1 Managing Vision

Vision is one issue that a leader must be able to manage. No one else can define the goals, chart the course, set the values, or monitor the process. Let me break this down in bite size pieces.

First, leaders must clearly see what SHOULD be. They must be idealists. They must have a vision of the grand purpose of a thing or group or project. They must be able to communicate to followers a clear, compelling vision of HOPE for what is not yet. That which is unseen in the light of reality must be clearly seen in the eye of the leader. Great leaders see things as though they exist long before they actually do. A congregation in our area set a goal of planting 1000 churches in 10 years. I dare say few leaders dare be that ambitious. The leader of the church acknowledged that the goal was ostentatious but serious. I should note that by mentioning these examples I am not suggesting that they are good examples to follow. In many ways I feel that many churches reflect our culture in looking like a "soul factory" for the purpose of producing impressive numbers. Measurable goals motivate but they may not fit the true agenda of a healthy church. It is significant to note that in the many lists of desired attributes of those who would be "spiritual" numerical productivity is seldom if ever mentioned. What we find are character traits like "kindness, love, patience, and graciousness." At the end of the day God is more impressed with who we become than what we produce. A compelling vision for the church should focus on these unique qualities of the Kingdom more than the superficial nickels and noses that may not indicate anything other than we know how to draw a crowd.

Not everyone has this ability to see what should be. Leaders must be able to communicate their vision in compelling ways that inspire in others the living hope that this can become a reality – no, that this will become a reality. But this idealism must be tempered by the leader's ability to see some other things.

Second, leaders must see what CAN be. Leaders must temper their idealism with the limits of the real world and its available resources. Leaders must be idealists but more than idealists they must be realists as well. They must inspire expectant faith in God and others that stretches the imagination but not so fare beyond the horizon of reality that only an "entrepreneur spirit" can buy it. Leaders must inspire FAITH in bite size pieces that followers can swallow and wear as their own "assurance of things hoped for." I have known young pastors who had visions of building a mega church in a rural area of North Carolina where there was no large metropolitan city. This would be a hard vision to sell to rural people. But then again I know of a rural congregation in Oregon that had a weekly attendance that was larger than the entire county where it met. And this leads to what is the most frustrating task for many leaders.

Third, leaders must accept what IS. Leaders must be willing to work their vision within the horizons of the real world and especially with the real people and resources that are actually present. Leaders have no sky-hook coming down from heaven with pots of gold, gobs of talent, perfect circumstances, and freedom from roadblocks. Gracious acceptance of the reality of disappointments with circumstances and especially with people is a rare but valuable characteristic of successful leadership. People seldom follow those that they sense do not understand them and love them especially when they fail. LOVE is the soil that enables hope and faith to grow. It is hard not to be drawn to those who know us and still love us. We are inclined to follow them. This brings us to the final and most neglected part of managing vision.

Forth, leaders must be aware of what MIGHT be. Leaders must be able to empathize with the FEARS of others and help

them manage their anxiety in the face of possible failure. This will be treated more fully later but for now lets just say that casting a vision must always be done with the recognition that everything that can go wrong might go wrong. Because leaders tend to be fearless they often fail to respect the real fears within the hearts of those who follow. If a leader cannot help folks manage their fears they will not follow, as the leader wants and needs them to. These last two points call for patience on the part of leaders if they want to attract followers.

Charting a Vision that Inspires

Vision statements have become an accepted part of modern organizational structure. This is a recent phenomena that is best understood in the context of the growing pluralism in our culture. In the past, such statements could be assumed but in a growing world community where groups of people from very different cultures and traditions are coming together and relating to other groups of mixed background, vision cannot be taken for granted. In charting a vision statement I suggest three things.

First, a vision statement must appeal to the CORE of our common being. By that I mean it must inspire something deep within our common soul. As bearers of God's image we long to have the Spirit of God called out from our inner heart and we want the Spirit to sing "Amen" at the sound of a vision to be and to do that which we were created to be and do. This means that a vision statement should not be trite or superficial although it can be and should be simple. What is it that makes Christian community unique in our culture? Among other things – faith, hope, and love should be strong contenders. Expressions like: "We worship a God who offer hope to the helpless, faith to the scenic, and love to the unlovely." can strike a cord.

Second, a vision statement must reflect who we KNOW we are based on our experience and performance. We will own and remember a vision statement if we can wear it comfortably. If we have to work too hard to understand it or make it fit the reality of who others and we see ourselves to be we will find it rather meaningless. For this reason it is suggested that writing a

final vision statement be postponed until you have a reputation. A new congregation in our community placed an advertisement in the local paper, which read among other things: "Come to the friendliest church in town." They had not had a meeting yet but the marketing hype was operating before the doors were open let alone the "friendliest people" had been found. I dare say this is not the kind of image that communicates authenticity.

Spiritual formation for individuals as well as groups can be described as "knowing yourself", "accepting yourself", "forgetting yourself", and "giving yourself." Each challenge builds on the one that comes before. It starts with knowing who we are. A vision statement must reflect who we know ourselves to be if we are to wear it well. Now to be sure knowing yourself may be no small task but it can be helped by simply answering the question: What do those who know us say about us?

Third, a vision statement should be MEMORABLE. It should be clear, concise, and catchy. Keep it as simple as possible. A good test: After repeating and writing the statement ten times can it be recalled with little or no effort? Lets look at some examples that I think work. Campus Crusade for Christ boiled their statement down to three words – "win, build, send." A motorcycle ministry put it this way: "We ride for the glory of God." The class family of room #138 had everyone sign this statement: "We will do our best to learn by working together and being nice to each other." Our congregation at one time used these words: "We strive to respond to Christ as his Body - reaching up, down, in, out, back, and forward." The Disney Corporation has many divisions and many statements but one that caught my attention was: "We work to exceed the expectations of every visitor." Prince of Peace Lutheran church used: "We seek peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peace with our fellowman."

#2 Managing Relationships

As soon as a leader leads more than one person the challenge of managing relationships comes up. Good leaders are seldom relationally challenged. They must know how to get along with

people in ways that motivate, love, care for, and impart information. All of this is based on the ability to communicate effectively. To talk about communication it is helpful to have some categories. Let me suggest six categories that have helped me.

1. Small talk – This is the most casual type of communication and is the sphere of connecting where we either politely kill time or feel out the relationship for the purpose of more substantive connecting.

2. Shop talk – This is the popular sphere of connecting for the purpose of sharing common interests, investments, and intentions. Many conversations start with small talk—"Where do you live?" "What do you do for a living?" The last question may lead to shop talk as we find someone who's vocational experience interests us or relates to our experience. Leaders are experts at shop talk. Just listen to them when they get together.

3. Steer talk – This kind of communication is motivated by a desire to manipulate the person I am talking to. It is intended to steer them in a way that brings them to agree with me or do something that I want them to do. It is a very important part of any authentic dialogue. If you have no desire to change those in your company you probably are of limited spiritual value in the relationship. We each have something to offer that should challenge those who relate to us. But too often steer talk is used to push people where they don't care to go. Probably more relationships are broken because of selfish steer talk. This can be a leaders greatest virtue or greatest vice.

4. Shield talk – This kind of communication is designed to keep people from getting too intimate or close. It includes the use of humor, the ability to change the topic or turn the attention away from touchy subjects. In many cases it is the loud sound of silence as we walk away and end the communication because it is more than we care to manage. Shield talk is often necessary as there are some times and topics that we need to protect as a part of our

private world. For example when my wife asks me how her new expensive dress looks I may face a delicate fork in the road. If I do not like it, I may sense that it is not in the best interest of our relationship to be blunt about my feelings but rather to find some way to affirm her without revealing my raw feelings about her "ugly expensive" dress. At that point I may properly implore skillful shield talk. I will say something designed to respect the relationship but also conceal my personal assessment. What I am doing is trying to navigate my way through the conversation in such a way that I protect (shield) something from being disclosed out of respect for a more important issue. In this case my respect for my wife and our relationship. It is helpful to recognize some typical signs of shield talk—humor, intellectualization, sarcasm, small talk, hysteria, hostility, etc. Many people find that one of the most effective deterrents to unwanted intimacy is hostility or displays of strong negative emotion. Such displays tend to cause others to back off or retreat from all but the most superficial kinds of communication.

5. Search talk – This kind of communication is an important part of true intimacy. It is a move to invite another person to share their heart without fear of rejection. It often comes in the form of a question or observation like: "I sense that you are feeling low today. Is something on your mind?" or "I know you must be overjoyed by the news of your new church family. Tell me what is it that most impressed you to join?" In these overtures I am opening a door and inviting a more intimate level of sharing from the heart. There are two important considerations in search talk. First we must be careful to make it safe for others to be honest and speak from the heart. People are usually hesitant to be honest about parts of their inner life simply because they feel they will be penalized socially for it, or they will be misunderstood, or they will have it used in some way to hurt others or themselves. We must create an environment where people feel that we will work to understand them,

commit to protect their dignity, and strive to care for their inner soul. Second we must open doors with words that invite honest responses. Questions are most useful here but there are many other ways of opening doors. Sharing from our own hearts is a helpful invitation for others to follow suite. This is an area where leaders must develop skills if they are to get people to follow the vision, work together, and take risks in following.

6. Straight talk – This form of communication is the other part of true intimate connecting. It is the place where we share our heart, where we are transparent. It is the place where we communicate what we want, how we feel, what we fear, and how we understand an issue. It is the point of greatest risk and greatest reward in any relationship. It is the response to search talk and is the goal of all effective relationships. Leaders must model straight talk lest they send confusing messages. One of the greatest frustrations that followers experience with their leaders is in not being clear as to where the leader stands what the leader really wants, and where the leader is going. Too many leaders are masters of small talk, shop talk, steer talk, and shield talk, but weak at search talk and straight talk. I would suggest that this is one of the most crippling weakness in many leader's ministries. They are frustrated that their vision is not shared or trusted. They are struggling to manage troubled relationships with their staffs. They feel powerless to combat opposition to their ministry, etc. Not all problems are due to communication failures but I sense that many of them are. Leaders should be aware of the categories I mention above and work to develop communication skills.

Connecting

We all tend to have an outward image that serves as our social security in relationships. We work to develop, preserve, and defend the image lest our true raw heart be

exposed and we be marginalized to a life of isolation and shame. We develop self-images and the strategies for preserving them from the coaching of our parents, our culture, and our experiences in life. If we are blessed with a healthy upbringing and develop self-respect early in life we will probably find it easier to know our true heart and confidently avoid the shields that others use to protect their insecurity.

There are three observations that leaders must respect if they are to be skilled in relationships that enable followers to work with them and with each other. First **they must realize that most people communicate shield to shield not heart to heart**. In other words, my image is relating to your image. We are both using a lot of shield talk and very little straight talk. At this level of relating there is no real intimacy. Fear is allowed to rule. We only allow others to see what we want them to see and visa versa. We may not even acknowledge our own heart because we are so uncomfortable with its contents. In these cases our shield is the only self that we know or at least acknowledge. A leader must assume that shield talk is a challenge that he or she must respect and work to overcome. This requires, patience and skill. One of the common mistakes leaders make is to use too much shield talk in their communication. Leaders often live behind an image that is seen as useful if not necessary for their role. In defending their own insecurity they should not be surprised if their relationships suffer. When my image and fears relate to your image and fears we may feel safe but we are not connecting.

Second **leaders must be committed to making communication a heart to heart experience**. This must start with their use of search talk and straight talk. It will involve recognizing some typical signs of shield talk that I mentioned above—humor, sarcasm, small talk, intellectualization, hysteria, hostility. It may mean addressing our own insecurities and finding the faith and courage to move past them in our commitment to greater intimacy and

connectedness. There are some specific tips that I have found helpful in moving toward a heart to heart kind of relationship. First be slow to react or speak, and quick to listen. Good listeners send valuable messages without talking. We tend to open up with those who will really listen to us.

Second the way leaders respond to the ideas of others is a critical juncture in the relationship. People will feel it is safe or useless to share their heart depending on our response to their ideas. In responding to new ideas that you may not like it is better to say: "This might work if . . ." rather than saying: "This will not work because . . ." The first expression says: "If you had thought about this as fully as I have you would not make such a stupid suggestion." The second suggests: "In consideration of your idea let me help you identify and overcome some things that may prevent it from being successful."

Third love opens doors for leadership. I have an anachronism that guides me in this area. (L)isten to people's concerns, (O)verlook their weaknesses, (V)alue their strengths, and (E)mpathize with their pain.

There is a third observation that leaders must respect if they are to be skilled in relationships that enable followers to work with them and with each others. Leaders must **realize that our shield talk is supported by fears that we don't know how to manage**. That leads us to the final topic in our discussion.

#3 Managing Fear

The third challenge to every leader is the management of fear. Like all people, leaders have certain fears. Like others they use shield talk to protect their image, which they often see as vital to their success. But it is generally safe to say that most leaders are not afraid of one of the things that terrify followers most— change. Leaders often have no idea how scary new ideas may seem to those who do not understand or trust them. It is safe to say that the leader who ignores the fears in the lives of followers

will find great resistance to their leadership. Behind the core fears in most of our lives is the realization that we live lives of great dissonance. Our faith expectations, our personal experiences and our observation of others seldom match up. We feel stress because we are unable to fully get our lives together. There is a deep-seated theologically rooted shame that comes from this personal dissonance.

To manage fear we must understand it. At the risk of oversimplifying our fears let me suggest that the fears that most Christians experience are related to a series of lies that they believe about themselves. I refer to this as Satan's sneaky pack of lies. They are four.

1. **Focus on law not grace.** Who sinned—me (shame) or you (blame)? When we live a law-based life we will live with fear. Leaders who manage fear do so with a deep, authentic, experience, and expression of grace.

2. **Unrealistic expectations.** Our expectations of God, others, and ourselves are often distorted. I too often expect that if God really loved me He would obey my commandments. We are shocked when our friends act immaturely and we are ashamed by our repeated inconsistencies. Effective leaders are seldom shocked by the behavior of others or by their own shortcomings. They make it safe to fail with the assurance that we will get up and not give up. We will get through this.

3. **A toxic church culture**. The typical American church culture has been described as narcissistic (self absorbed), pragmatic (whatever works is good), perfectionist (unrealistic expectations), and punitive (graceless in practice). This spiritually hostile environment is too often advanced by leaders, applauded by followers, and avoided by outsiders. An inmate at a local prison told me that he could expect more hugs at a bar than at his church. The church should be the safest place in the world to be honest but it seems to be just the opposite.

4. **Fake it till you make it**. We have been convinced that looking good and getting results is better than being honest and developing character. The lists of spiritual virtues in the New

Testament are void of any reference to how we look or what we produce. They are all about integrity and character. Leaders must know this, model this, and be committed to teaching it.

As long as we tolerate the lies embedded in the above concepts we will cultivate a culture of fear. Fear prevents people from taking risks. Risks are essential for growth, change, and supporting courageous leaders.

So how do we recognize an effective leader? I suggest that an effective leader will be seen not only in the existence of followers but also in the nature of and posture of their followers. Are they inspired to follow a clear vision? Do they relate to each other effectively? Are they free to take risks? We need Leaders who can facilitate this.

#4 Managing Conflict

The fourth challenge to every leader is the management of conflict. Lilly Tomlin put it this way, "The greatest source of stress is reality and those who chose to live in it." It does not take much experience in the real world to realize that real life is messy. It is messy because people are different. When individuals do not share the same passion, vision, abilities, fears, etc. there will be conflict. We might think that effective leadership would illuminate conflict if they instilled a clear vision, facilitated close relationships, and mitigated fears. But one of the great assets of any organization is the differences within the organization. It is our differences that enable us to creatively solve problems, make progress, stimulate creativity, and make life exciting.

Conflicts reveal two positive things about humans that mark us as unique among all God's creatures. The Bible tells us that we are created in the image of God. What does that mean? One, it indicates that we have personal values. We are unique among all God's creatures in that we have a moral sense that is rooted in a vision that are more complex than just survival instincts. We aspire to be like God. If we are healthy, we have opinions, passions, abilities, experiences, and observations that

enable us to see life in a way that is unique to us. This is a reflection of the image of God deeply installed within us.

The image of God within us is seen not only in our personal values and also in our desire for social harmony. We are not islands disconnected or independent from others. We are designed to be social and as such we long for harmony. We want others to agree with us, to share our visions, passions, and world. We are willing to work hard to seek, persuade, manipulate, and compromise so that we are not alone in our world. But it is this tension between on the one hand our deeply held personal values and on the other hand our desire for social community that creates conflict. This conflict is exacerbated by the fact that we have egos that are being defended, fears that are powerful, and blind spots that make it hard for us to empathize. We are sinners. Leaders stepping into such a world face the daunting challenge of managing conflict so that it is constructive rather than destructive. Leaders will realize that some conflict is necessary to separate the good from the evil, the real from the unreal, the wise from the foolish. As Jesus said, "I came not to bring peace but a sword." He knew that conflict in a fallen world was necessary to separate the sheep from the goats so to speak. The Apostle Paul made the same point in writing to the Corinthians when he said, "there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you." (1 Cor.11:19).

There are five challenges that I sense leaders must face in managing conflict.

Build a healthy organizational culture

Many organizations (including churches) are toxic seedbeds for destructive conflict. This should not surprise us when we consider the fact that our broader secular culture is deeply committed to, what I call the three "C's" of capitalism without a conscience – Competition, Control, and Contempt. We have let a "win at all costs" "victor take the spoils" "take no prisoners" mentality creep into our mindset so that capitalism, which has the potential to be of great benefit winds up being rather ugly. The values of God's kingdom are vital for our secular culture to be

constructive. These vales are what I call the three "C's" of capitalism with a conscience – Cooperation, Compassion, Creativity. Competition is a great virtue when it is linked with cooperation, and compassion. When it is isolated, it is neither nurturing to the human soul nor is it successful in bringing about lasting value. When it stifles creativity by demonizing the competition it cripples itself.

Leaders of any organization (including churches) need to avoid two toxic environments. One, **Rigidity** – the invitation to dissensions if not overt, certainly covert. Rigidity to the creative human spirit is like a red flag in the face of a mad bull. It invites conflict. The opposite extreme is just as toxic – **Chaos**. Radical diversity where anything goes creates insecurity and a lack of direction that results in paralysis, civil wars, and eventual self-destruction.

There are three errors that leader tend to make in shaping the culture of their organization so as to minimize destructive conflict. One, they **accentuate the negative** by letting problems control the agenda. While not ignoring the weaknesses, leaders should major on what is working right. Build on the strengths and many of the weakness will fall away. Focus all your attention on what is not working and eventually the whole culture will not be working. Two, they **kill the wounded** by discarding or ignoring problem people. The way leaders handle (care for) the dysfunctional among us will be one of the most powerful community building things a leader can do. We all want to be included, cared for, respected, valued, etc. Our fears of being abused shrink as we see grace applied with sensitivity to those among us by our leaders. In a church, which should include lots of folks who are needy in one way or another, there should be a sanctuary for help not a killing field for the crippled. The third error that leaders must avoid is to **pass the buck**. "Mistakes were made but not by me!" This is not what we need to see from the top. Leaders need to be listeners. A secret to success in facing opposition is to grow antenna not horns. Strong leaders display their strength not as entitlement, pride, and stubbornness, but rather as vulnerability, humility, and openness.

The way leaders handle dialogue within an organization is vital. There are two toxic approaches they can take. One, they can **boycott dialogue**. "Its my way or the high way!" Leaders don't only set the vision of an organization they must make sure others own that vision. This means that others must have meaningful input into it. It is a shared vision that is powerful in making progress toward a goal. The second toxic approach to dialogue that leaders tend to make is to practice **pseudo-dialogue**. This is "steer talk" or "shield talk" without "search talk" or "straight talk." It is to claim that dialogue is open when in actuality the issues are no longer open for input or change. When people sense that this is the culture of an organization they withdraw in cynical disengagement if not outright distrust. Good leadership facilitates **constructive dialogue** with lots of search talk and straight talk with a passion for harmony. There are few things that contribute more to an organizations health than leaders who are active listeners.

So what is a leader to do to create a healthy organizational culture? They would do well to go back and review the first three responsibilities of leadership. Point #1 was – Manage vision so as to inspire people to constructive action. Create boundaries with clear goals and expectations. Define priorities so you can major on majors and minor on minors. Point #2 was – Manage relationships to help people work together by building community through communicating love, which builds trust, security, and passion to follow. Point #3 was – Manage fears, freeing people to take risks. Make it safe to be honest, disagree, and fail. Model a life of faith and grace where leaders forebear with the weak, forgive the fallen, and protect the vulnerable. This is the best investment a leader can make in creating a healthy organizational culture.

Become a peacemaker

Personal dissonance gives us insight into social conflicts and their solution. The apostle James asks, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war on your members?" (4:1). Social

conflicts are linked to our inner personal conflicts. If we want to be peacemakers as leaders we must find personal peace in our inner souls. Leaders are handicapped by unresolved personal anxieties and anger. Leaders must conquer their fears and be able to forgive lest they contribute to their cultures conflicts. A wise leader will view their fears and anger as possible signs of unresolved inner conflicts. The challenge for them is not to repress the fear and control the anger so much as it is to use the fear and anger as a trailhead or window into their inner goals and values. Leaders must ask, "Why does this event trigger this response in me and what does that reveal about my goals and values?"

I have found that there are three questions that are key to conflict resolution for leaders and organizations. One, **are we willing to recognize our fears** or do we just pretend they are not motivating our responses to life? Fear lies at the foundation of the failure to love. Love is a fear breaker and in so doing it heals relationships. Two, **are we willing to reveal our fears**? Fellowship with God is linked to confessing our failures. Fellowship with man is linked to confessing our fears. If we can talk openly (straight talk) about what threatens us we can resolve most of our conflicts. Three, **are we willing to respect our fears**? I cannot move you without addressing your fears. You will not move me until you address my fears. Effective leaders know the importance of respecting and managing fear in themselves and others. Review the second management challenge in this article for more details.

Leaders must be peacemakers. Peacemakers must first be peace seekers knowing the power of grace and peace to set a soul free from fear, shame, and anger. For more material on this point see the author's two books – *Peace Seekers*, and *Peace Makers* published by LightMessages.

See conflict as an opportunity.

Leaders must expect conflict and see it as a unique opportunity to develop and demonstrate Godly wisdom, creativity, and character. Peter says, "to sum up, all of you be harmonious,

sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing." (1 Peter 3:8-9). There are certain virtues (like faith, hope, love, courage, and grace) that are seen most clearly in the context of fear, failure, abuse, disappointment and injustice.

Leaders must seize the moment not just to win the conflict or even to resolve it but to respond in a Godly way. Sometimes the issue is not who is right or even do we have peace but rather have we demonstrated and developed a godly testimony in our response. Lets face it, we will not always be able to resolve differences but we will always be able to respond in a godly way. Leaders don't have to win or create peace so much as show their followers how to respond to conflict in a godly way.

Delivering "bad news"

One of the most challenging and uncomfortable tasks in leadership is related to bringing news that will be difficult for people to hear—"Your services will no longer be needed.", or "We have to have a talk about your performance.", or "We have a problem and it involves you." Too many leaders pass these uncomfortable tasks off to subordinates. This is a big mistake for two reasons. First, it forfeits the leaders opportunity to demonstrate the vision and values of the organization at the most critical of moments when the vision and values can be misunderstood or slandered. Second, it is perhaps the most critical action that an organization takes in establishing its credibility to the general public for it is assured that the way difficulties are handled will be talked about outside the organization. Leaders need to shepherd the entrance and exit doors to any organization if they want to instill its vision and values as well as reduce problems down the road.

Leaders need to keep three things in mind when delivering difficult news. One, **Empathize**—put your self in the shoes of the person or group being addressed. You may not remove their pain, fear, or anger but you can assure them that you

understand how they feel and are concerned about them as individuals. In too many cases it is this sense of "leaders not caring" that makes a difficult situation much, much worse.

Two, **Explain**—take the time to give reasonable and detailed explanations of what has happened and why. If there is not a good explanation, the leader has to ask why? Often the true reason for an action is never disclosed because it is feared that the truth will make things harder to hear. If there is ever a time for "search talk" and "straight talk" (see above) this is it. What often needs to be said is this—this organization is not about you or me it is about a much bigger purpose and goal. In the case of the church the purpose is defined by the calling and purposes of God, which include loving people but not making them the center of the universe. The calling is to help people understand where and how they best fit in the Kingdom of God. In serving the goal of an organization we must be willing to serve its core values. Sam Walton had a simple philosophy of operation for his retail business. "We want to make high quality goods available to working class people at the lowest possible price. We (executives, stock holders, partners (employees) and venders) serve the customers first." This means that everyone from top to bottom is not to expect Wall Mart to exist primarily for his or her benefit. This philosophy sounded like great PR hype but what many stockholders, venders and partners did not realize is that it would be taken and applied seriously. When there is "straight talk" at the entrance to an organization it makes it much easier to have "straight talk" at the exit. When a partner at Wall Mark feels that they are unjustly asked to sacrifice for the customers benefit, they need to be reminded of the core vision and values of the company.

Three, **Encourage**—provide practical interest and help for people as they seek to understand and reach their personal goals in life. Showing practical interest in helping people in transition is a powerful gesture that will not be forgotten. This means that there must be a culture of caring and listening (see managing relationships above).

Mind your manners.

This is the fifth challenge I would make to leaders who would manage conflict. Learn the spiritual rules of engagement in responding to conflict. Lets just go through some bad manners in conflict etiquette. One, **Personalizing** – Letting every issue become personal where people are forced to fight for their souls. When I attach my sense of significance or security to an issue I am no longer capable of being objective because I am fighting for my soul's worth. At that point I become a ideological terrorist who is willing to die for this or that issue. There is little hope for resolving conflicts when the stakes are that high. Two, **Demonizing** – Impugning the spiritual motives or character of those who disagree does not contribute to peace. When this happens the opposition is forced to personalize the issue and fight to the death. Good luck in finding a compromising peace here. Three, **Trivializing** – Ignoring and belittling the arguments and agenda of those who disagree with us does not work for peace. The greatest disrespect we can show others is to ignore them and their contribution to the community. This invites conflict rather than minimizes it. Four, **Fossilizing** – Making issues black and white where there is an absolute right and wrong with no gray or real options will again force people to personalize their position, dig in, and refuse to give ground because their soul is at stake.

I identify six basic issues, which prevent successful conflict resolution. One, **poor leadership** – Don't ignore the first three responsibilities of leadership above.

Two, **Immaturity** – Emotional and spiritual children make conflict resolution very difficult. We must strive to grow up – knowing ourselves, accepting ourselves, forgetting about ourselves, and giving ourselves. Leaders who have unresolved personal problems will be handicapped as conflict mediators. Codependency in any organization is a recipe for conflict not a healing community that resolves conflict. When leaders are looking to the community they lead to meet their inner needs they will be a big part of any conflict problem rather than the means of

resolving tensions. Leaders often are asked to lead immature people and this calls for patience, skill, and grace.

Three, "**Stop the press!**" – If a person is not a part of the problem or the solution they should not be involved. When we try to recruit a crowd of spectators as soldiers to support our cause we are no longer seeking peace, we are committed to a civil war. War is not an acceptable way to resolve conflict.

Four, **Call off the lawyers** – The object is not to win but to glorify God with the process and the ends. When we dig for fin print in the archives of the organization to support our cause we are trying to shut off any constructive dialogue. Even if we win this round we will probably have to face another round later unless something is resolved on a deeper and more personal basis. We can agree to disagree but we should never stop listening to serious concerns, fears, and pain in the lives of those we share community with.

Five, **Short-term perspective** – Respecting the big picture can make conflict much easier to resolve. We often find common ground in the bigger picture of an issue. This allows us to explore together solutions to a tactical problem where we seem miles apart. Sixth, Poor etiquette – We should never ignore the previous point – Mind your *manners*.

#5 Managing Failure and Success

The fifth challenge to every leader is the management of failure and success. Every leader will have some of both if they give themselves to the responsibility of leading. There are several common misunderstandings that keep a "would be leader" from being really good at what they do.

One, leaders can foolishly believe that if they are gifted and called to lead **they should not make mistakes or fail**. This is a fantasy that is debunked by the track record of most of our greatest leaders. Leaders are marked not by avoiding failure but by learning from and overcoming failures. Failure is painful but

our response to failure is what will ultimately mark us. Babe Ruth struck out many more times than he hit home runs. Tiger Wood's greatest golf shots are not from the tee but from the rough where he was called to recover from a bad shot. Michael Jordan could miss his first 10 shots and keep shooting believing that at the end of the game he would have his 25 points. Abraham Lincoln was among the greatest presidents of our country but was defeated in political elections many more times than he succeeded. Positive persistence is what makes a leader successful in a world where mistakes are inevitable. Leaders find a way to reload, pick themselves and other up, learn from missteps, and above all not give up. They have the mindset that does not throw a "pity-party" when things don't go their way. They seem to be able to forget the past after they have learned from it and move on with confidence that a new day will bring success.

There are three valuable gifts that come to leaders when they fail. Note, I said WHEN, not IF they fail. **Humility** is the first gift of failure. Leaders that fail are forced to recognize they always have a need to learn and grow. Leaders never fully arrive. They are always in process of arriving. They never tire of learning, growing, or changing. Failure reminds leaders that they are not God and that they need other people to be successful. Pride can stifle leadership. Pride is different than confidence. Confidence is faith that I can make a valuable contribution, achieve worthy goals, and meet the hard challenges of life. Pride is the perception that I am better than others. It is narcissistic and segregates the leader from a sense of community. It sees accomplishment as property that is owned by the leader as apposed to the fruit of God given talents working in the context of a broader culture and community. Good leaders are humble and undeterred by being humbled. They don't take failure personally but they do insist on learning personally from it.

Knowledge is the second gift of failure. Time and effort that does not lead to success is wasted only if there is no knowledge acquired in the process. Leaders spend a lot of time learning what not to do. A fool is someone who persists in doing the same thing over and over expecting to get different results

while not learning in the process. Persistence is a virtue but only if it is yoked with perception. If we are not able to apply wisdom to our persistence we may be only stubborn fools. The key to wise persistence is learning as you go. Repeated behavior that does not bear fruit must at least bear knowledge. If we are not succeeding or are not learning, we need to probably change something so we can succeed or learn.

Creativity is the third gift of failure. Leaders let failure and frustration inspire new strategies, visions, and plans. Those who let failure lead to defensive, withdrawal from risk or trying new ideas tend to wither and die as leaders. Failure should energize a leader to be creative, to solve the problem, to take it as a challenge to take a risk. In some ways this will seem unnatural to many who are not leaders. They will tend to retreat, be conservative, and even depressed when things don't work out as expected. They take failure personally and feel defeated or worthless. A leader looks at failure as an invitation to try something different, new, and outside the box. They have this "strange" ability to objectify their work role and separate their ego needs from it.

Success can be failure in disguise

While failure can take the wind out of a person's sails so can success. Success often has the very positive effect of increasing confidence, inspiring risk taking, unleashing creativity, and energizing more success. But this is not always the case. If the person in a position of leadership is not careful, is not hungry to grow, is not always learning and improving, then success can lead to carelessness, disengagement, and boredom. There are many leaders who need to have a new mountain to clime, a new challenge to face, or a new objective to reach. When they do not have the challenge of some new vision they are no longer motivated. Success in building an organization, conquering a challenge, or reaching an objective often leads to the need to manage the results. When the leader is asked to manage what he or she has built there can be problem. Many good leaders do not like to manage and will dry up trying to function in that role. This

is unless they are able to see their accomplishments as not a finished project but a dynamic entity that will always call for skilled leadership. This leads to the sixth challenge.

#6 Managing Change

The sixth entity that good leaders must be able to manage is Change. Change is inevitable if for no other reason than the environment in which we live is ever changing and fast. What was a great idea two years ago may be a bad idea today. Leaders who have experienced success may be tempted to bank their accomplishments, tenure their ideas, or solidify their methods. This is almost always a death sentence for long-term effectiveness and fruitfulness. Not to mention, the slow death that it brings to the leader as a creative, motivated, inspiring, point person.

Healthy organizations need both stability and change. Good leaders must be comfortable with never ending changes within an organization while respecting the need for some core values and standards to remain fixed. Good leaders are able to know where they must be flexible and where they should not flex. Organizations are strengthened by strategic stability based on roots (core values and vision) that do not change or that changes very slowly and carefully. But they also need tactical flexibility that can change with the environment and can move rather quickly to accommodate new circumstances.

The challenge of change provokes anxiety in any organization. Chronically anxious organizations focus on their anxiety rather than on the challenge that change poses. This is especially true if leaders are not effective managers of change. To see the challenge of change as a catalyst for growth, leaders need to have the capacity to tolerate pain both in them selves and in others. There are four postures that leaders can take with respect to pain tolerance. First, they can have a high toleration of pain in themselves but a low toleration of pain in others. This is called "**compassion fatigue**." It leaves leaders exhausted in trying to remove the stress of life from the back of others. Leaders with

strong empathy and weak emotional boundaries are particularly vulnerable. Second, they can have a low tolerance of pain in them selves and in others. This we can call "**dependence / codependence**." These leaders will find any change almost intolerable because of their inability to manage the pain. Thirdly, leaders can have a low toleration of pain in them selves and a high toleration of pain in others. In this case the leader bring out a "**victim card**" that can easily be experienced as abuse by others who are expected to take up all the slack, pay all the bills, and absorb all the pain in the change process. Effective leaders need to cultivate a high toleration for personal pain and equip others to also have a high toleration for the pain of change. This is the more "**healthy**" posture.

A healthy posture in facing the pain of change must recognize and help people resist five toxic responses to this pain. The first is – **flight,** which is active or passive withdrawal. The idea of change chases some people away. They disengage in active participation or leave the organization altogether. The second is – **fold** or "show up, shut up, and give up." Too many organizational leaders seem to be satisfied with followers who rubber-stamp everything and anything the leader says or does. These leaders do not realize that their posture is shutting down one of the greatest resources that any organization has—the creative, caring, protection and productivity of its members. A third is – **freeze** or shut down. This is the posture where folks don't "run off" they stay put but loose all energy to cooperate. They don't follow but they don't leave either. They become dead wood. The fourth is – **fake** it or offer superficial support but fail to really get on board. This happens a lot in organizations where there is a high need to be included in the community. This need trumps the need to be engaged in constructive change. The final toxic response to the pain of change is the one most leader hate to see. It is – **fight** or hostile attack. This is the civil war posture that brings so many organizations to their knees. When a leader cannot manage change well, he or she will certainly experience this response and it can paralyze an organization.

#7 Managing Self

In many ways, this is the most important and the most challenging management responsibility that a leader has. Why is this so hard for most of us? It is not easy to know and except ourselves because, like Adam and Eve, we have had a tendency to hide FROM God rather than IN God (Psalm 32). As a consequence of our soul shame we have a hard time seeing ourselves for who we really are. The greatest lies we tell are the lies we tell to ourselves about ourselves. We must come to see that we are often less worthy than we think and worth more than we imagine. We need to see that it is not our natural talents and strengths that are our greatest assets but rather our knowledge of and comfort with our weaknesses (1 Cor.1:26-31; Phil.3:7-11).

Spiritual development can be outlined as follows: 1) Know yourself, 2) Accept yourself, 3) Forget about yourself, 4) Give yourself. We will briefly consider each.

Know Yourself

Knowing ourselves is a bit more complex than we might at first appreciate. We are the composite of a set of beliefs, values, preferences and abilities that make us both unique from and similar to others. Putting our hands on the contours of our soul is in some ways a life long project and worthy of our attention. It is the first step and the key to unlocking the other steps to successful self-management.

I have observed that there are at least four paths that can lead to self-knowledge. First, a carful reflection on one's **personal history** is important. What does your gene pool look like? What did your family of origin teach you about life, especially through their modeling? We may feel we have moved a good distance from our parent's world of values, fears, and assumptions but we will not ever fully escape their influence. Sometimes it is easier to see our parent's strengths and weaknesses than our own, and we can start by assuming that what we see in them is to some degree present in us as well.

The second path that is helpful in knowing who we really are is **temperament analysis**. There are many instruments that can help us see how we compare to other people. We share differences and similarities that perhaps we are unaware of without the aid of these instruments. One that I have found most helpful is the Myers Briggs system especially as it is interpreted through the Keirsy / Battes lens. It identifies four basic types of temperaments: 1) Goal oriented doer [Sensing / Judging], 2) Process oriented doer [Sensing / Perceiving], 3) Objective knower [iNtuitive / Thinking], and 4) Subjective knower [iNtuitive / Feeling]. Each of these families of temperament types can be divided into four sub types giving us 16 comparative categories. The theory is that we have a preferred "type" or "style" out of which we respond to life. By studying people with similar style preferences we can learn a lot about what they will do well and where they are not as competent. The fact is, many of us think we are or try to be someone other than our true self. Once we recognize ourselves in a particular temperament profile we may find information about us that we did not consider but now see as obvious. Temperaments are not good or evil. They are just different like fingerprints or physical size. This leads to a third path of investigation.

The **role we play** in the story of life is the third consideration in trying to know ourselves. What is our vocation, avocation, family situation, social contribution, spiritual gift, etc.? The responsibilities we have embraced, inherited, etc. will shape us to some extent in that they will define the expectations that others have of us, which in turn will influence how we think and behave.

The fourth path to self-knowledge is **feedback from close friends**. It is unfortunately rare that we ask and receive honest feedback from others about who we really are. This is remarkable when compared to how much time many of us spend contemplating or worrying about what others might think about us. Those who work and live with us can be invaluable mirrors for us if we ask them and make it safe for them to be honest. Of course we must always remember that being an objective

observer is hard to find. This is why feedback from several people is preferred. Here are a series of questions that might lead to helpful information. 1) What do you see in my behavior that comes across as defensive (emotionally self- protective)? 2) How do you perceive that I deal with anger? 3) What do you sense makes me feel insecure or afraid? 4) Where do you feel I am most trustworthy? 5) How do I affect the way you feel about yourself when I am with you? 6) What do you sense are my blind spots – areas where I just don't have a clue?

In all of this soul searching we must be diligent to look for two things that are vital to a mature self-awareness. 1) Our **default strategies of self-defense** can be assumed. All of us have ways in which we protect our true self's dark side from being exposed. Is it attack, withdrawal, deflective humor, or something else? Knowing our protective strategies is the first step in dealing with them appropriately. It is our unacknowledged strategies that are most threatening to a deep knowledge of our soul's essence. 2) Our **core beliefs and fears** are the second thing we should look for in coming to know ourselves. What we think we believe and fear may be quite different from what really scars us and assures us. Out actions will betray our deepest fears and faith. When we say we find our security in the love of God and yet behave in such a way that those around us see a desperate attempt to please others, and develop an image along cultural values, we have a disconnect.

Accept Yourself

One of the hindrances of knowing ourselves is the fear that when we see our true selves we will feel unacceptable. This leads to our creation of a false image of the self that we deem more acceptable. We are created in the image of God and can never fully escape an inner conscience of the soul, pulling us toward our designed purpose of intimate union with God, other people, and our environment. Our fallen condition renders us vulnerable not only to the intimidation of God's image in us but also to the expectations of those around us as we look to them for a temporal acceptance. We waste a lot of energy trying to resolve the dissonance in our souls between who we really are and who we

deeply sense we should be. We feel a sense of shame like Adam and Eve in the Garden after their rebellion (Gen.3). As Adam tried to hide his inner inadequacy we also hide behind an image. Cultivating this false image hinders our understanding of who we really are. Until this false front is acknowledged and a deeper understanding of self is reached there will be a nagging anxiety or dissonance in our soul that will stubbornly persist. The acceptance we deeply need and long for must be based on knowledge of who we really are in spite of our unattractiveness.

The moral law of God is given to remind us of God's image stamped on our souls and it will expose our dark and ugly side. When we see ourselves "under the law" we will or should sense tension and shame. An inadequate understanding of God's grace leaves people sensing they are on probation before God because of the weaknesses of their flesh, the inconsistencies in their walk, and the unresolved moral tension in their lives. This was the Apostle Paul's state as he viewed himself "under the law" (Rom7:21-25). Paul's solution was a new "mind set" or a new way of seeing himself "in Christ" through faith (Rom.8:1-17). In short, it is the radical grace of God that allows us to see ourselves with all our blemishes and also fully accept ourselves knowing that the life of Christ is the source of our security, significance, and serenity. It is this sense of God's love and acceptance that motivates and frees us to grow in our conformity to Christ in the relationships of this world.

Forget about Yourself

Forgetting about our self is a natural link between accepting our self and giving our self. The kind of selfless love that we are called to display is not possible while we are preoccupied with creating, maintaining, and protecting our image. Freedom to love comes only as we forget about our self or as Paul says, "die to our self."

Healthy forgetting about our self is only possible as we are able to fully accept who we are by God's grace in Christ. To the extent we can walk through the steps of knowing our self and accepting our self we will be able to forget about our self. Granted, this is a process and struggle that is not ever or fully

complete in this life. But to the extent we take these steps we experience the fruit that comes with them. Attempts to give ourselves without first dying to self (Rom.12:1-2) will create inner frustration with the demands of true love as it encroaches on our self interests. Failing to properly deal with "self" will also be seen in the outer inadequacies at effective caring in our relationships others.

So what is the key to forgetting about self? It is fearlessly facing who we are and living in the context of the radical grace of God in Christ. This is facilitated by a community that reinforces both the radical grace of God and the truth of who we really are.

Give Yourself

Giving our self is the fruit of the three steps that come before it. Giving *of* our self is not the same as giving *up* our self. It is possible to outwardly serve others and make sacrifices in doing so but yet not truly give our self to God or others. Christians are called to service of a certain kind. We are called to service that is selfless—dead to selfishness. Giving *of* our self is can be a subtle form of self-serving while the giving *up* our self is rooted in forgetting about "me" having known and accepted self.

Self-giving is a posture that faces a second challenge. When the Scripture speaks of dying to our self or laying aside our self it is assuming a context of truth and grace—truth about who we are and grace about God's accepting love. We should care for our self and properly protect our self as stewards of the gift of life. Jesus words, "love others as yourself" come to mind. Giving up self is healthy when it comes from self-acceptance not self-degradation or loathing. Giving yourself is a move that should come from a position of strength, confidence, and security not from a posture of emptiness, timidity, and insecurity.

So there you have it—seven challenges for successful leaders. Are there more? Of course there are. But these are seven starters that I want to see in those who lead my friends and me. They are also qualities that I aspire to see in myself.