

*“Lead”*  
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Human beings don't live life based on the facts of their experience but on their interpretation of the facts. I know the average pastor is overworked, understaffed, and underpaid. Behind the failure of a pastor is a weak and failed leadership community. Could it be that the way we have structured local church leadership, the way leaders relate to one another, the way we form a leader's job description, and the everyday lifestyle of the leadership community may be contributing factors to pastoral failure? Could it be that many of our leadership communities don't actually function like communities?

I want to turn your thinking toward the foundational character and lifestyle of a healthy church leadership community. We have seen loyalty, power, and division control decisions rather than biblical wisdom. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:1–3)

Six characteristics that will mark out a leadership community formed by gospel values:

**1. Humility**

Humility means you love serving more than you crave leading. It means being more excited about your fellow leaders' commitment to Christ than you are about their loyalty to you.

**2. Dependency**

It means living as if I really do believe that isolated, individualized, independent Christianity never produces good fruit. It means confessing that as long as sin remains in me, and that apart from restraining grace and the rescuing ministry of those around me I continue to be a danger to myself.

**3. Prepared Spontaneity**

You will not be more concerned with defending the reputation of your leadership community than dealing with its failures.

**4. Inspection**

Inspection means that we invite people to step over the normal boundaries of leadership relationships to look into our lives to help us see things that we would not see every leader must be willing to live under loving, grace-infused, patient, and forgiving biblical inspection.

## **5. Protection**

True biblical love doesn't just accept you, bless you with patience, and greet your failures with forgiveness. Along with all these things, it works to do everything it can to protect you from the eternal weaknesses of heart that make you susceptible to temptation. Because we as leaders don't always see ourselves with accuracy, and because we don't always see the areas in which we are weak, we all need a protective community that is watching for us even when we aren't as watchful as we should be.

## **6. Restoration**

Fresh starts and new beginnings are a hallmark of the rescuing, forgiving, restoring, and transforming power of God's grace. Grace means we are not held to our worst moment or cursed by our worst decision. Do our leadership communities function with a gospel-driven, restoration mentality?

I meet individually on a regular basis with ten young pastors and ministry leaders. Again and again I am saddened that they lack the kind of gospel-rich community that every pastor or leader needs in order to be spiritually healthy and to enjoy ministry longevity.

### **Achievement**

I want to consider how a good thing—achievement—can become a bad thing for leadership because it has become a ruling thing. Where once we were ambitious for what we want, we now are ambitious to do the will of God.

Ambition is a spiritual battleground, and it must also be said that in the leadership community of the church, ambition for God's glory and his kingdom easily and subtly morphs into something else. They worked hard, planned big, and trusted that God would produce results. Leaders progressively separated from the body of Christ and became less candid, approachable, and accountable.

Growth and money now dominated their discussions and their vision. Increasingly staff members are afraid of doing anything that would get in the way of corporate achievement.

Staff that didn't achieve or who questioned decisions or values were quickly let go. At the heart level, leaders had changed, and before long, the changed leadership community would, in pride of achievement and unapproachability of spirit, destroy what God had so graciously built.

Below are signs that indicate when achievement has become dangerous. Use these to evaluate your leadership community and for the purpose of honest leader self-examination.

1. Achievement becomes dangerous when it dominates the leadership community.
2. Achievement becomes dangerous when it controls our definition of leaders.

3. Achievement becomes dangerous when it forms our view of success and failure.

The lack of desired results should not define leadership failure. True failure is always a character issue. It is rooted in laziness, pride, lack of discipline, self-excusing, failure to plan well, lack of joy in labor, and failure to persevere during hardship. Failure is not first a matter of results; failure is always first a matter of the heart.

It's failure when I have not invested my God-given time, energy, and gifts in the work God has called me to do. Ministry laziness and unfaithfulness are failure. In ministry, success and failure are not a matter of results but are defined by faithfulness. Faithfulness is what God asks of us; the rest is entirely up to his sovereignty and the power of his grace.

4. Achievement becomes dangerous when it silences honest leader communication.

In achievement-dominated leadership communities, that kind of honest talk tends to get silenced. It's not silenced by the plan of any one person but by the values of the leadership community. Think with me about the danger of a ministry leader who feels he can't be real with anyone.

Denial of weakness is never a pathway to good things. Hiding, denial, and fear will keep a ministry community from spiritual health, and the lack of spiritual health will prohibit the ministry longevity that is a necessary ingredient in realizing long-term results.

5. Achievement becomes dangerous when it causes leaders to view disciples as consumers.

Our ministry passion and energies should be focused on doing everything we can to lead the people entrusted into our care into a deeper love for and service to Jesus so that everything we do serves this disciple-making purpose. We have the power to build church stuff, but we have no power whatsoever to build people. When it comes to people building, we are completely dependent on transforming grace.

6. Achievement becomes dangerous when it tempts us to see people as obstacles.

7. Achievement becomes dangerous when it causes leaders to take credit for what they never could have produced on their own. You take credit as a leader instead of assigning credit to the one who sent you and who alone produces fruit out of your labors, you will praise less, pray less, and plan more.

Leadership communities are in trouble when they assign more power to their planning than to their prayer. You begin to assess yourself as capable rather than needy, as strong rather than weak, and as self-sufficient rather than dependent.

Way too many leadership communities in the church of Jesus Christ are populated by leaders who, because of ministry success, have become unapproachable and controlling. God doesn't call us to ministry leadership because we are able, but because he is.

8. Achievement is dangerous when it becomes the principal lens of leader self-evaluation.

Achievement as the dominant measure of leadership is dangerously single-focused and imbalanced and gives a false view of the condition of those in a leadership community. A life of long-term ministry productivity is always the result of the condition of the leader's heart.

9. Achievement becomes dangerous when it tempts us to replace prayer with planning.

Does success produce worship of God in your community or self-congratulation? achievement can turn humble servant leaders into proud, controlling, and unapproachable "Mini Kings." Leadership in the church is not comfortable and predictable. It's not a safe place to look for your identity and inner security.

### **A Leadership Community Formed by the Gospel**

A Gospel Community Is Nurturing

A Gospel Community Is Honest

A church or ministry leadership community simply cannot do its work if leaders are silenced because they are afraid of what others will think of them. But if the acceptance and respect of fellow leaders or of the most powerful leader in the room becomes more important to us than honesty within ourselves, before God, and in relation to one another, we give room for sin to germinate, grow, and take control. One of the sure signs of a spiritually healthy leadership community is the degree to which heartfelt, humble, honest confession is not only possible but a regular ingredient of the life and work of that community.

A Gospel Community Is Humble

A devastating spiritual transaction can take place in the heart of a leader, often subconsciously. Living and ministering for the glory of God increasingly gets replaced by self-glory. Humility gets replaced by pride in position, acclaim, and success.

A Gospel Community Is Patient

We are required to be patient because we are not sovereign.

Pride of accomplishment, identity of success, and the idolatry of power are the soil in which impatience grows, and that impatience always results in a harvest of bad fruit, both in leaders and in those they lead; so they don't steward people's gifts well, giving time and room for expression, and they don't give time for God to work insight and willingness into people's hearts. All this creates a ministry culture of fear, where people feel more constrained and driven than commissioned and shepherded.

A Gospel Community Is Forgiving

In ministry leadership, it is impossible not to be dealing with sin and failure in some way. Somehow, someday, every leader you work with will disappoint you.

When this happens to you, you will deal with the sin, weakness, and failure of others either with forgiveness and restorative wisdom or with subtle denial, quiet bitterness, active or slow-burn anger, or the disloyalty of slander. There are too many angry leaders in the church of Jesus Christ.

A Gospel Community Is Encouraging

A Gospel Community Is Protective

We all need a lovingly protective leadership community to help us see things that we need to see but are blind to on our own.

A Gospel Community Is Restorative

### **Four Limits**

#### **1. You Have Limited Gifts**

Every leader needs to humbly assess not only where he is gifted but also, and as important, where he is not. One of the reasons the ministry leadership community is broken is that we have idolized domineering leaders who fail to recognize the limits of their gifts, who disrespect the God-given gifts of fellow leaders, and who have been allowed to think that they are smart, gifted, and strong in ways that they are not. Pride in one's own giftedness coupled with devaluing the gifts of others is a recipe for leadership disaster.

Humble leaders surround themselves not with ministry clones but with leaders who have gifts that they do not and are therefore smart in ways they are not and strong in areas they are weak. We have witnessed too many uniquely and powerfully gifted leaders begin to view themselves, because of their gifts, as entitled to a level of power, position, and lifestyle that others are not. My gifting shouldn't make me arrogant and boastful. It shouldn't cause me to think I am deserving. And the gifts I have been given were never designed to function in isolation from the gifts of others.

It's sad to see leaders use their gifts to accumulate power and acclaim and an enriched lifestyle. Because of the public nature of your gifts, you will suffer dangerous adulation and harsh criticism. The demands of your ministry life will tempt you to neglect your personal devotional life. Your gifts will tempt you to be demanding, irritable, and impatient with people of lesser gifts or who happen to be in the way of what you want. You will be tempted to confuse your giftedness with your level of spiritual maturity.

#### **2. You Have Limited Time**

You will always need Sabbath rest no matter how mature you become or how many leaders work alongside you. There are few more important things for a spiritually healthy leadership community to consider than the time limits that God designed for his creation from the get-go. Is ministry and the desire for ministry achievement balanced with a commitment to relational and spiritual health in each of your leaders?

### 3. You Have Limited Energy

I hear a lot about spiritual health but little about physical health. You see, the stewardship of our physical body is not an addition to our gospel ministry calling; it is a significant part of it. I am convinced that widespread church and ministry leadership gluttony is robbing us of both gospel consistency and physical energy. It is my love for my Savior and his gospel that causes me to eat with discipline. I think we must talk about stewarding physical health in our leadership-community conversations.

### 4. You Have Limited Maturity

As I have dealt with fallen or lapsed pastors, I have noted that around them was a weak or dysfunctional leadership community that failed, in pastoral love and care, to protect that leader from himself. A spiritually healthy leadership community participates in the ongoing personal spiritual growth of each one of its members. Until we are on the other side, we will live, minister, relate, and live with limits. God is not afraid to call limited people into gospel leadership, so we should not be afraid,

Idolatry is when things take on a greater weight in our hearts than God does. Idolatry is your heart out of balance. Think of your heart, as a leader, as an ancient scale with weights on either side. as long as sin lives inside you, you will struggle to keep things in your life and ministry in proper balance. In ministry good things become ruling things.

Leadership position, power, respect, acclaim, and success begin to take on more weight in our hearts than they should ever take. Good godly habits get left behind in our ministry drivenness. In ministry the way you pursue your idols is by doing ministry. Even prayer becomes something entirely different when our hearts are out of balance. You want to appear humble, contrite, worshipful, grateful, and theologically informed, not to God but to the other people who are in the room.

Every good thing that takes on more weight than God intended becomes a bad thing, something disruptive and dangerous. You can't do your work as a leadership community without healthy mutual respect. But that respect must not take on more weight in your heart than the honor of God does. A spiritually healthy leadership community should be always considering and regularly discussing the question of balance in the lives of its leaders.

What Does Heart Balance Look Like in the Life of a Leader?

Here is a suggested list:

His leadership is shaped by faith, not fear.

He leads out of humility and neediness, not pride and self-reliance.

He is quick to give grace because he knows how much he needs that same grace.

She does not love power and position more than she loves God and the people he has called her to serve.

He is as excited about and committed to the private pastoring of his family as he is to his public leadership work.

She resists being defensive and is humble and approachable toward others and quick to confess sin.

He does not use ministry calling and position to build a kingdom of his own.

She cares more about living and leading in a way that pleases God than about gaining the praise of those around her.

He does not look for his identity in his role as leader but rests in his identity in Christ.

She leaves the people around her feeling loved and nurtured.

He never talks in negative ways outside the leadership community about those he has been called to partner with in ministry.

His leadership is more pastorally driven than politically driven.

She has such a rest in God's wise and loving control that she does not need to be in control.

He always deals with diversity in a way that promotes unity.

He does not despise weakness but fears delusions of independent strength.

His leadership is marked more by love than by power.

She is sympathetic, understanding, patient, and forgiving.

He is always committed to reconciliation and restoration, no matter how costly.

He sees his physical body as an instrument of his calling, and because he does, he gives it proper attention and care.

He leads out of a heart that has its appetites and desires under control.

He does not ask of others what he is not willing to do himself.

He is not jealous of or intimidated by the gifts, experiences, and successes of fellow leaders.

She is as committed to sabbaths of rest as to the achievement of goals.

Personal holiness motivates him more than leadership position or ministry success.

He does not crave power but willingly cedes it to others.

She is known more for joy than complaint.

He willingly sits under the instruction of others and weighs others' opinions with humility and grace.

His leadership is more of an extended act of worship than a commitment to career advancement.

He loves Jesus more than he loves himself.

He gives up precious things out of love for fellow leaders and those they together have been called to lead.

His children do not feel ministry has robbed them of their dad.

He longs for the gospel to transform the deepest reaches of his heart.

He leads with the mentality of an ambassador and never with the mentality of a king.

When he is wrong or has done wrong, he willingly submits to loving confrontation and godly discipline.

Her ministry is shaped by the promises of the gospel and not by the "what ifs" of an anxious heart.

There are other lords that war in my heart, that challenge the weight that God alone should have in my thoughts.

Between the "already" and the "not yet," we are unfinished ministry in a broken world.

A sampling of areas to lovingly look at as you commit to mutual leader care;

- Marriage and family problems
- Workaholism
- Lack of commitment to a regular devotional life
- No regular commitment to sabbaths of rest
- Unhealthy ministry or leadership relationships
- Lack of regular, meaningful connection to the fellowship and mutual ministry of the body of Christ
- Debt
- Unwholesome communication
- Anger
- Discouragement,



- depression,
- burnout
- Physical ill health
- Resistance to loving criticism and spiritual care
- Domineering or controlling manner Unreconciled relationships

The life and work of a leadership community is shaped not just by the gifts of its leaders, their vast experience, the force of their public personalities, entrepreneurial skill, or vision and strategic planning, but most importantly by their values. At the root of many of the heartbreaking leadership failures we have all witnessed is this subtle and progressive shift in values. Every leader of every ministry works in a world where the enemy lurks, seeking to divert, deceive, and destroy. In God's eyes, character trumps performance. Are we too tolerant of argumentative, domineering ministry know-it-alls?

Every character quality is a window into what God values most in the heart and life of those he has called to lead. Have we closed our eyes to certain character deficiencies in a leader because of the effectiveness of his leadership performance? Is there anyone in our leadership community whom we have quit holding accountable because of his ministry effectiveness?

It's time for us to confess that personal ambition often moves and shapes our leadership more than the gospel does. A leader whose heart has been captured by other things doesn't forsake ministry to pursue those other things; he uses ministry position, power, authority, and trust to get those things. An unhealthy leadership community accepts what it should not accept, is silent when it should speak, and is passive when it should act.

We live every day in a war zone. We live in a daily state of spiritual war and must therefore live with eyes open, heart engaged, mind alert, and protective gear in place—how much more is it true of those leaders our Lord has raised up to stand at the forefront of the battle

1. Each leader must humbly accept and be growingly aware of his susceptibilities.

No leader is safe thinking he is impervious to attack. Perhaps there is no better defense against spiritual attack than humility. Pride in ministry achievements puts you in battle danger. Surrounding yourself with leaders who are no longer willing or are too fearful to challenge and confront you is to leave yourself exposed. We must not let our desire to be respected by fellow leaders keep us from confessing where we are under attack and where we tend to succumb.

2. As a leadership community, personal and corporate spiritual war must be a regular part of our ongoing conversation with one another and a central focus of our prayer together. We cannot let ministry busyness excuse the fact that we are not keeping one another alert and safe.

3. We must examine and defend ourselves against Satan's devices. The primary tool the enemy uses to attack, disable, defeat, and set aside ministry leaders is ministry itself. Our sense of identity is always in a state of flux; that is to say we are always thinking about who we are and defining and redefining ourselves. Public acclaim can alter the way we think about who we are and what we need.

Leaders who once led with a servant mentality assess their track record and become comfortable acting entitled and demanding. Powerful gifts don't alleviate your vulnerability. Leaders who do not serve aren't actually leaders.

To lead is to serve. To serve is being willing to suffer. All horizontal complaints have a vertical component. We desire greater power and control that is greater sovereignty over our ministry lives than a servant will ever have. Self-focus never leads to happiness, it never produces contentment, and it never results in a satisfied heart. Hypercritical theological arrogance is not the fruit of a servant's heart. Ministry leadership conversations that are regularly marked by complaint are the fruit of entitlement, not servanthood.

An isolated, independent, separated, and self-hiding Christian life is alien to the Christianity of the New Testament. A spiritually healthy leadership community is spiritually healthy when it is a safe place for struggling leaders to speak with candor and hope.

Are there subtle, unspoken ways that you look down on leaders who are weak?

Does your leadership culture silence confessions of struggle?

What silences humble gospel candor in our leadership communities?

#### 1. Pride of Personal Maturity

If ministry has come to define you, the gospel won't.

#### 2. Ability to Minimize Sin

Any leadership community that has become individually or corporately comfortable with minimizing sin is in real and present spiritual danger.

#### 3. Must Have the Respect of Others

We care too much about what fellow leaders think of us. I want too much to be respected. I want too much to be liked. I am too concerned with being spoken well of. I overly desire that fellow leaders affirm my ideas and give weight to my plans. If I care too much about what they think of me, I will put forth my strengths while hiding my weaknesses and failures.

#### 4. Identity in Ministry

Looking horizontally, as a leader, for your identity, meaning, purpose, and internal sense of well-being asks people, places, and position to do for you what only your Messiah can do. Ministry as a source of identity will never result in healthy gospel-shaped relationships in your leadership community,

#### 5. Functional Gospel Doubt

Will we allow ourselves to esteem ministry identity and position more than we esteem a humble and clean heart before the Lord and in relationship to the fellow leaders he has placed us near? I was more focused on building an identity than sharing my heart. Getting our identity from ministry is not only a dangerous and miserable ministry experience, but also disrupts the kind of ministry community that we need and that serves the spiritual health of fellow leaders.

For example, understanding “creature” as a basic piece of your identity changes everything. If I have been created by someone, then that someone had a purpose in mind for making me, so understanding that purpose is vital to my proper functioning. There may be no more important and life-shaping interpretation that human beings make than identity. Since the fall, people look horizontally for what they were designed to find vertically.

Identity in Christ is intended to be the defining element in the way that a believer makes sense out of who he is and what he is supposed to be doing. A ministry leader’s identity is a place of temptation and a spiritual battleground and, sadly, does not always remain constant. A significant aspect of the drift and then fall of ministry leaders begins with an identity exchange.

The power of influence and position begin to be where a leader looks to know who he is.

Nothing good is produced in a leader who has along the way exchanged identity in Christ for some form of identity in ministry.

#### A Profile of a Leader Who Has Made the Identity Exchange

Following is a suggestive, but surely not exhaustive, list:

##### Fear

You look too intensely at how people are responding to you, and you listen too carefully to what people are saying and how they say it. There are too many leaders among us who do too many things out of fear and not faith.

##### Pride

No leader has the power to create change. No leader is able to determine results. No leader can control the response of people, let alone the flow of events.

##### Emotional Highs and Lows

For all the people who love and appreciate you, there are people who misunderstand and misjudge you. Leader, you will never experience long-term spiritual health and stability when you look to your ministry position and function to give you what the Savior has promised you and is delivering to you.

##### Control

The most controlling people I have counseled or worked with have always proven to be the most fearful.

### Sensitivity

You tend to take offense where no offense was meant. Is fear, pride, control, or sensitivity an indicator of something you should examine? Everybody believes in grace until a leader needs it. Ministry effectiveness is not to be confused with cleanness of heart. The key to ministry-leadership effectiveness is longevity. Every leadership community should be clear that giftedness is not the same as spiritual maturity. We are tempted to like quick and despise slow. We are tempted to esteem new and disrespect old. We are attracted to new ideas instead of ancient truths.

### Humility , Courage , Hope

Spiritual maturity in the life and ministry of a ministry leader is about being humbled by the gospel, made courageous by the gospel, and infused with sturdy hope by the gospel. If we are not doing our work with the presence and glory of God in view, we will take credit for what we could never institute, produce, and control on our own.