

J. OSWALD SANDERS

Spiritual Leadership

Principles of Excellence for Every Believer

OVER
1 MILLION
SOLD



Essential Qualities of Leadership

Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

1 TIMOTHY 3:2-7

Jesus trained His disciples superbly for their future roles. He taught by example and by precept; His teaching was done “on the road.” Jesus did not ask the Twelve to sit down and take notes in a formal classroom. Jesus’ classrooms were the highways of life; His principles and values came across in the midst of daily experience. Jesus placed disciples into internships

(Luke 10:17–24) that enabled them to learn through failure and success (Mark 9:14–29). He delegated authority and responsibility to them as they were able to bear it. Jesus’ wonderful teaching in John 13–16 was their graduation address.

God prepares leaders with a specific place and task in mind. Training methods are adapted to the mission, and natural and spiritual gifts are given with clear purpose. An example is Paul, who never could have accomplished so much without directed training and divine endowment.

Similarly, God prepared Adoniram Judson to become a missionary pioneer in Burma by giving to this remarkable leader qualities necessary for launching the gospel in the Indian sub-continent—self-reliance balanced by humility, energy restrained by prudence, self-forgetfulness, courage, and a passion for souls.

Martin Luther has been described as a man easy to approach, without personal vanity, and so plain in his tastes that people wondered how he could find any pleasure with so little money. He had common sense, a playful humor, eager laughter, sincerity, and honesty. Add to those qualities his courage, conviction, and passion for Christ. It is no wonder that he inspired loyalty in others that had the strength of steel.¹

Professor G. Warneck described Hudson Taylor, the missionary pioneer to China: “A man full of faith and the Holy Ghost, of entire surrender to God and His call, of great self-denial, heartfelt compassion, rare poser in prayer, marvelous organizing faculty, indefatigable perseverance, and of astounding influence with men, and withal of childlike simplicity himself.”²

God gave these leaders gifts and talents that fit the mission to which they were called. What raised these men above their fellows was the degree to which they developed those gifts through devotion and discipline.

DISCIPLINE

Without this essential quality, all other gifts remain as dwarfs: they cannot grow. So discipline appears first on our list. Before we can conquer the world, we must first conquer the self.

A leader is a person who has learned to obey a discipline imposed from without, and has then taken on a more rigorous discipline from within. Those who rebel against authority and scorn self-discipline—who shirk the rigors and turn from the sacrifices—do not qualify to lead. Many who drop out of ministry are sufficiently gifted, but have large areas of life floating free from the Holy Spirit’s control. Lazy and disorganized people never rise to true leadership.

Many who aspire to leadership fail because they have never learned to follow. They are like boys playing war in the street, but all is quiet. When you ask, “Is there a truce?” they respond, “No, we are all generals. No one will obey the command to charge.”

Donald Barnhouse noted with interest that the average age of the 40,000 people listed in *Who’s Who in America*—the people who run the country—was under twenty-eight. Discipline in early life, which is ready to make sacrifices in order to gain adequate preparation for life tasks, paves the way for high achievement.³

A great statesman made a speech that turned the tide of national affairs. “May I ask how long you spent preparing that speech?” asked an admirer.

“All my life,” he replied.

The young man of leadership caliber will work while others waste time, study while others snooze, pray while others day-dream. Slothful habits are overcome, whether in thought, deed, or dress. The emerging leader eats right, stands tall, and prepares himself to wage spiritual warfare. He will without reluctance

undertake the unpleasant task that others avoid or the hidden duty that others evade because it wins no public applause. As the Spirit fills his life, he learns not to shrink from difficult situations or retreat from hard-edged people. He will kindly and courageously administer rebuke when that is called for, or he will exercise the necessary discipline when the interests of the Lord's work demand it. He will not procrastinate, but will prefer to dispatch with the hardest tasks first. His persistent prayer will be:

*God, harden me against myself,
The coward with pathetic voice
Who craves for ease and rest and joy.
Myself, arch-traitor to myself,
My hollowest friend,
My deadliest foe,
My clog, whatever road I go.⁴*

Few men were more faithful and courageous in giving loving rebuke or speaking frankly to people than Fred Mitchell, British director of the China Inland Mission and chairman of the English Keswick Convention. Sensitive and affectionate, he did not turn from the unpleasant interview. He always spoke in love, after much prayer. But his words did not always fall on receptive ears. He confided how much he had suffered when his faithfulness to God's work led to the loss of a friend. As he reached older age, Fred spent even more time praying before speaking. Often when he needed to deal with a matter of discipline, he would write a letter, then keep it for several days. Sometimes, on rereading it, he was assured it was right to send it, so it would be mailed. Sometimes he destroyed the draft and wrote another.⁵

When the founder of the World Dominion Movement, Thomas Cochrane, was interviewed for the mission field, he

faced this question: “To what position of the field do you feel specially called?” He answered, “I only know I should wish it to be the hardest you could offer me”—the reply of a disciplined person.

Lytton Strachey described Florence Nightingale:

It was not by gentle sweetness and womanly self-abnegation that she brought order out of chaos in the Scutari hospitals, that from her own resources she had clothed the British Army, that she had spread her dominion over the serried and reluctant powers of the official world; it was by strict method, by stern discipline, by rigid attention to detail, by ceaseless labor, by the fixed determination of an indomitable will. Beneath her cool and calm demeanor, there lurked fierce and passionate fires.⁶

Samuel Chadwick, the great Methodist preacher and principal of Cliff College, made an immense impact on his generation. He rose at six each morning and took a cold bath, summer and winter. His study light was seldom out before two in the morning. That rigorous lifestyle was the outward expression of his intense inner discipline.⁷

Throughout his life, George Whitefield rose at four in the morning and retired each night at ten. When that hour struck, he would rise from his seat, no matter who his visitors or what the conversation, and say good-naturedly to his friends, “Come, gentlemen, it is time for all good folks to be at home.”⁸

Barclay Buxton of Japan would urge Christians to lead disciplined lives whether they were in business or evangelistic work. This included disciplined Bible study and prayer, tithing, use of time, keeping healthy with proper diet, sleep, and exercise.

It included the rigor of disciplined fellowship among Christians who differed from each other in many ways.⁹

These glimpses of personal biography illustrate the meaning of an unknown poet:

*The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight;
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.*

If a leader shows strong discipline, others will see it and cooperate with the expectations placed on them. At this point, leadership by example is crucial.

There is another element in discipline that receives too little attention. We must be willing to receive from others as well as give to others. Some sacrificial souls delight in sacrificing themselves, but refuse reciprocal gestures. They do not want to feel obligated to those they are serving. But real leadership recognizes the value of the gestures of others. To neglect receiving kindness and help is to isolate oneself, to rob others of opportunity, and to deprive oneself of sustenance. Our example in this is the ultimate Servant Jesus, who came to serve but graciously accepted the service of others—people like His hosts Mary and Martha, the use of the colt He rode into Jerusalem, and others.

Bishop Westcott admitted at the end of his life to one great mistake. He had always helped others, but just as rigorously he had resisted others serving him. As a result, his life had an empty spot where sweet friendship and human care might have been.¹⁰

VISION

Those who have most powerfully and permanently influenced their generation have been “seers”—people who have seen more and farther than others—persons of faith, for faith is vision. Moses, one of the great leaders of all history, “endured, as seeing him who is invisible” (KJV). His faith imparted vision. Elisha’s servant saw the obvious menace of the encircling army, but Elisha saw the vast invisible hosts of heaven. His faith imparted vision.

Powhatten James wrote:

The man of God must have insight into things spiritual. He must be able to see the mountains filled with the horses and chariots of fire; he must be able to interpret that which is written by the finger of God upon the walls of conscience; he must be able to translate the signs of the times into terms of their spiritual meaning: he must be able to draw aside, now and then, the curtain of things material and let mortals glimpse the spiritual glories which crown the mercy seat of God. The man of God must declare the pattern that was shown him on the mount; he must utter the vision granted to him upon the isle of revelation. . . . None of these things can he do without spiritual insight.¹¹

Charles Cowman, founder of the Oriental Missionary Society, was “a man of vision. Throughout his life he seemed to see what the crowd did not see, and to see wider and fuller than many of his own day. He was man of far horizons.”¹²

Vision involves foresight as well as insight. President McKinley’s reputation for greatness rested in part on his ability to put an ear to the ground and listen for things coming. He turned his listening into vision; he saw what lay ahead. A leader must be

able to see the end results of the policies and methods he or she advocates. Responsible leadership always looks ahead to see how policies will affect future generations.

The great missionary pioneers were people of vision. Carey saw the whole globe while fellow preachers limited the world to their parish borders. Henry Martyn saw India, Persia, and Arabia—the Muslim world—while the church at home squabbled over petty theological disagreements. People said of A. B. Simpson: “His lifework seemed to be to push on alone, where his fellows had seen nothing to explore.”

A senior colleague once told Douglas Thornton of Egypt: “Thornton, you are different from anyone else I know. You are always looking at the end of things. Most people, myself included, find it better to do the next thing.” Thornton’s answer: “I find that the constant inspiration gained by looking at the goal is the chief thing that helps me to persevere.”¹³ An ideal, a vision, was absolutely necessary to him. He could not work without it. And that explained the largeness of his views and the magnitude of his schemes.

Eyes that look are common; eyes that see are rare. The Pharisees looked at Peter and saw only an unschooled fisherman—not worth a second look. Jesus saw in Peter a prophet and preacher, saint and leader who would help turn the world upside down.

Vision involves optimism and hope. The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty. The pessimist tends to hold back people of vision from pushing ahead. Caution has its role to play. We all live in a real world of limitation and inertia. Cautious Christians draw valuable lessons from history and tradition, but are in danger of being chained to the past. The person who sees the

difficulties so clearly that he does not discern the possibilities cannot inspire a vision in others.

Browning described the courageous optimist:

*One who has never turned his back,
But marched breast-forward,
Never doubting clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted,
Wrong would triumph.*

Vision leads to venture, and history is on the side of venture-some faith. The person of vision takes fresh steps of faith across gullies and chasms, not “playing safe” but neither taking foolish risks. Concerning Archbishop Mowll it is written:

It was a mark of his greatness that he was never behind his age, or too far ahead. He was up at the front, and far enough in advance to lead the march. He was always catching sight of new horizons. He still had a receptive mind for new ideas at an age when many were inclined to let things take their course.¹⁴

Leaders take lessons from the past, but never sacrifice the future for the sake of mere continuity. People of vision gauge decisions on the future; the story of the past cannot be rewritten.

*A vision without a task makes a visionary.
A task without a vision is drudgery.
A vision with a task makes a missionary.¹⁵*

WISDOM

“Wisdom is the faculty of making the use of knowledge, a combination of discernment, judgment, sagacity, and similar powers. . . . In Scripture, right judgment concerning spiritual and moral truth” (Webster).

If knowledge is the accumulation of facts and intelligence the development of reason, wisdom is heavenly discernment. It is insight into the heart of things. Wisdom involves knowing God and the subtleties of the human heart. More than knowledge, it is the right application of knowledge in moral and spiritual matters, in handling dilemmas, in negotiating complex relationships. “Wisdom is nine-tenths a matter of being wise in time,” said Theodore Roosevelt. Most of us are “too often wise after the event.”¹⁶

Wisdom gives a leader balance and helps to avoid eccentricity and extravagance. If knowledge comes by study, wisdom comes by Holy Spirit filling. Then a leader can apply knowledge correctly. “Full of . . . wisdom” is one of the requirements for even subordinate leaders in the early church (Acts 6:3).

*Knowledge and wisdom, far from being one,
Have oftentimes no connection. Knowledge dwells
In heads replete with thoughts of other men:
Wisdom, in minds attentive to their own.
Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much,
Wisdom is humble, that he knows no more.
(Author Unknown)*

D. E. Hoste knew the importance of wisdom for leaders:

*When a person in authority demands obedience of another,
irrespective of the latter's reason and conscience, this is tyranny.*

On the other hand, when, by the exercise of tact and sympathy, prayer, spiritual power and sound wisdom, one is able to influence and enlighten another, so that a life course is changed, that is spiritual leadership.¹⁷

Paul's prayer for the Christians at Colosse should always be on our lips: That "God . . . fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9).

DECISION

When all the facts are in, swift and clear decision is another mark of a true leader. A visionary may see, but a leader must decide. An impulsive person may be quick to declare a preference, but a leader must weigh evidence and make his decision on sound premises.

Once sure of the will of God, a spiritual leader springs into action, without regard to consequences. Pursuing the goal, the leader never looks back or calculates escape strategies if plans turn sour. Nor does a true leader cast blame for failure on subordinates.

Abraham showed swift and clear decisiveness during the crisis in Canaan and the rescue of Lot (Genesis 14). In his relations with his nephew, Abraham showed both the active and passive sides of spirituality. In his unselfish yielding of his right to the choice of pasturelands (Genesis 13), Abraham displayed the passive graces of godliness. But when Lot was captured during a battle at Sodom, Abraham took immediate action. With great bravery he pursued the enemy and gained a victory over superior numbers. This is true faith.

Moses became the leader of Israel when he abandoned Egypt's power and privilege and identified with the Hebrew

slaves and their suffering (Hebrews 11:24–27). These were momentous decisions. This is true faith.

Paul's first question after his dramatic conversion was "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10). Without hesitation Paul acted on his new knowledge of Christ's deity. To be granted light was to follow it. To see duty was to do it.

The catalog of saints in Hebrews 11 is a study of vision and decision. They saw the vision, counted the cost, made their decisions, and went into action. The same sequence is evident in the lives of great missionary leaders. Carey saw the vision in Kettering and made his decision for India, though the difficulties of getting there loomed as high as heaven itself. Livingstone saw the vision in Dumbarton, made his decision, overcame all obstacles, and proceeded to Africa.¹⁸ Circumstances cannot frustrate such people, or difficulties deter them.

The spiritual leader will not procrastinate when faced with a decision, nor vacillate after making it. A sincere but faulty decision is better than weak-willed "trial balloons" or indecisive overtures. To postpone decision is really to decide for the status quo. In most decisions the key element is not so much knowing what to do but in living with the results.

Charles Cowman had the reputation of being a man of purpose. His eyes were fixed on one great object. With him, a vision was the first step in an action plan. The moment he sensed a possibility, he was uneasy until achievement was underway.

A young man beginning his work with the Coast Guard was called with his crew to try a desperate rescue in a great storm. Frightened, rain and wind pounding his face, the man cried to his captain, "We will never get back!" The captain replied, "We don't have to come back, but we must go out."

COURAGE

Leaders require courage of the highest order—always moral courage and often physical courage as well. Courage is that quality of mind that enables people to encounter danger or difficulty firmly, without fear or discouragement.

Paul admitted to knowing fear, but it never stopped him. “I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling,” he reported in 1 Corinthians 2:3, but the verb is *came*. He did not stay home out of fear for the journey. In 2 Corinthians 7:5, Paul confesses “conflicts on the outside, fears within.” He did not court danger but never let it keep him from the Master’s work.

Martin Luther was among the most fearless men who ever lived.¹⁹ When he set out on his journey to Worms to face the questions and the controversies his teaching had created, he said, “You can expect from me everything save fear or recantation. I shall not flee, much less recant.” His friends warned of the dangers; some begged him not to go. But Luther would not hear of it. “Not go to Worms!” he said. “I shall go to Worms though there were as many devils as tiles on the roofs.”²⁰

When Luther appeared there before the court of Emperor Charles V, he was shown a stack of his writings and called upon to recant. Luther replied, “Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning, then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience.”

Then he likely added: “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.”

A few days before his death, Luther recalled that day. “I was afraid of nothing: God can make one so desperately bold.”

Not everyone is courageous by nature. Some people are more naturally timid than Luther. But whether we are bold or reticent, God calls leaders to be of good courage and not to capitulate to fear. Such a call to courage would be rather pointless if nobody feared anything. Because fear is a real part of life, God gives us the Holy Spirit, who fills us with power. But we must let that power do its work, and not fear.

Consider these two contrasting statements: “The doors [were] locked for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19), and, “When they saw the courage of Peter and John” (Acts 4:13). These statements describe the same disciples, and the same opposition. The difference is time. What happened between the first and the second? The Holy Spirit did “not give a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Courageous leaders face unpleasant and even devastating situations with equanimity, then act firmly to bring good from trouble, even if their action is unpopular. Leadership always faces natural human inertia and opposition. But courage follows through with a task until it is done.

People expect leaders to be calm and courageous during a crisis. While others lose their heads, leaders stay the course. Leaders strengthen followers in the middle of discouraging setbacks and shattering reverses.

Facing the ruthless armies of Sennacherib, Hezekiah made his military preparations and then set about strengthening the morale of his people. “Be strong and courageous,” he told them. “Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him. . . . With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles.” And then the Scriptures report that “the people gained confidence from what Hezekiah the king of Judah said” (2 Chronicles 32:7–8). Here is leadership, active and strong.

HUMILITY

Humility is also a hallmark of the spiritual leader. Christ told His disciples to turn away from the pompous attitudes of the oriental despots, and instead take on the lowly bearing of the servant (Matthew 20:25–27). As in ancient days, so today humility is least admired in political and business circles. But no bother! The spiritual leader will choose the hidden path of sacrificial service and approval of the Lord over the flamboyant self-advertising of the world.

We often regard John the Baptist as great because of his burning eloquence and blistering denunciation of the evils of his day. His words pierced and exposed the hearts of many a petty ruler. But his real greatness was revealed in one infinitely wise affirmation: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30 KJV). Here John’s spiritual stature rings clear and strong.

A leader’s humility should grow with the passing of years, like other attitudes and qualities. Notice Paul’s advance in the grace of humility. Early in his ministry, he acknowledged: “I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle” (1 Corinthians 15:9). Later he volunteered: “I am less than the least of all God’s people” (Ephesians 3:8). Toward the end of his life, he spoke of the mercies of Christ and his own sense of place: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Timothy 1:15).

William Law writes in his devotional classic *Serious Call*:

Let every day be a day of humility; condescend to all the weaknesses and infirmities of your fellow-creature, cover their frailties, love their excellencies, encourage their virtues, relieve their wants, rejoice in their prosperities, compassionate over their distress, receive their friendship, overlook the unkindness,

*forgive their malice, be a servant of servants, and condescend to do the lowliest offices of the lowest of mankind.*²¹

On one occasion when Samuel Brengle was introduced as “the great Doctor Brengle,” he noted in his diary:

*If I appear great in their eyes, the Lord is most graciously helping me to see how absolutely nothing I am without Him, and helping me to keep little in my own eyes. He does use me. But I am so concerned that He uses me and that it is not of me the work is done. The axe cannot boast of the trees it has cut down. It could do nothing but for the woodsman. He made it, he sharpened it, and he used it. The moment he throws it aside; it becomes only old iron. O that I may never lose sight of this.*²²

The spiritual leader of today is the one who gladly worked as an assistant and associate, humbly helping another achieve great things. Robert Morrison of China wrote: “The great fault in our missions is that no one likes to be second.”²³

INTEGRITY AND SINCERITY

Paul spoke of his failures and successes with an openness few of us are prepared to copy. Even before his conversion he served God sincerely (2 Timothy 1:3) and with great personal integrity. Later he wrote: “In Christ we speak before God with sincerity” (2 Corinthians 2:17).

These two qualities of leadership were part of God’s law for the Israelites (Deuteronomy 18:13). God wants His people to show a transparent character, open and innocent of guile.

A prominent businessman once replied to a question: “If I had to name the one most important quality of a top manager,

I would say, personal integrity.” Surely the spiritual leader must be sincere in promise, faithful in discharge of duty, upright in finances, loyal in service, and honest in speech.

FOR REFLECTION

This chapter describes eight essential qualities of leadership: discipline, vision, wisdom, decision, courage, humility, integrity, and sincerity. Which one needs the most attention in your life right now? Why?

How would you explain the point that discipline has an effect on the development of every other leadership quality?

Describe the difference between integrity and sincerity as you understand these spiritual qualities.

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