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The most difficult adjustment that you must make as you acquire flying skill is a willingness to believe that, under certain conditions, your senses can be wrong. . . . When your senses seem to disagree with the instruments, trust the instruments—they may save your life.

MEDICAL HANDBOOK FOR PILOTS

He who leans on, trusts in, and is confident of his own mind and heart is a [self-confident] fool, but he who walks in skillful and godly Wisdom shall be delivered.

PROVERBS 28:26 (AMP)





Introduction

The Leadership Flight

Our executive team of the large Southern California church sat around the table one June morning as we did most Tuesdays for our weekly meeting. John MacArthur, our pastor and leader, opened the morning edition of the *Los Angeles Times*. An article appeared just inside the front page with breaking news about a well-known West Coast megachurch.

John read us the heartbreaking story of a pastor who had served his congregation for almost three decades, leading the church to exponential growth, effective church planting, and profound global impact through a well-funded missions program. Two days earlier, the pastor had publicly confessed to an affair that dated back eight years. According to the story, the tryst lasted eleven months. His resignation was sudden, shocking, and newsworthy, even in the minds of the secular reporters of the *Times*. Perhaps their interest was sparked by this pastor's visibility in fighting gay rights in the state as a spokesman of the Moral Majority. The secular press often delights in contradictions of this sort.

A fascinating conversation ensued, as we grappled with many key questions. What would the church do? Would they try to restore him to leadership? How would they recover? Would the pastor's marriage survive? Of

course, we prayed for the church, the pastor, and his family that day. We were heartbroken by another confession, another scandal, another trusting and growing flock with violated trust, an uncertain future, and a long road to recovery. This story was more fuel for a skeptical, watching world.

For me, it was a bit more personal. I knew the church well through some friends who served on the staff. Two months earlier I had visited the church with a colleague to learn more about their worship ministries and administrative structure. In many ways, this was a model church.

My disbelief and heartache that June morning would eventually turn to devastation and heart-wrenching pain in the ensuing years. This tragedy would become very personal—perhaps too personal—and more trying than I could have ever anticipated.

A Growing List of Leadership Disasters

Since that morning in 1988, I've heard hundreds of stories just like this one. The reports of leadership fallout seem more frequent, and in some cases more twisted and shocking than the previous. Pastors of churches large and small appear to be falling like flies. According to Focus on the Family, 1,500 pastors a month leave the ministry due to church conflict, marriage problems, moral disqualification, or unresolved personal problems.¹ This is a severe and ongoing tragedy, perpetually devastating the church.

We've also watched denominational leaders, famous Christian recording artists, and high-profile televangelists become embroiled in scandalous financial and sexual misconduct. Of course, leadership failure is not just epidemic in the church world. Whether it is the Oval Office, the governor's mansion, the Senate floor, or the House of Representatives, scandals abound throughout the American political scene. All too often we see powerful, intelligent people in a "crash and burn" mode due to private dealings that caused the unraveling of their credibility.

In the business arena we remember stories like Enron, the multifaceted energy company that went from claimed revenues of nearly \$101 billion in 2000 to bankruptcy in 2001 because of institutionalized, systematic, and

creatively planned fraud and corruption. Numerous companies have followed similar paths under the leadership of CEOs who compromised and brought the company down with them.

In sports and entertainment, we can recognize many smart, talented, motivated people who lost their moorings. The scandals surrounding Martha Stewart's insider trading, Michael Vick's illegal dogfighting, Mel Gibson's DUI conviction, and Winona Ryder's shoplifting conviction are all reminders that smart people do stupid things when their "internal processors" become flawed and confused.

Leaders Losing Altitude

As president of a national renewal organization, I visit and interact with hundreds of leaders each year, the vast majority of whom are faithful and skilled servants of God. Yet many of these leaders open up to me about their personal and private challenges. The pain is deep. The struggles are real. They are called to leadership, and want to remain faithful, but many are losing their way and hanging on for dear life.

One of my great desires is helping leaders who are "losing altitude." Our organization, Strategic Renewal, raises funds to help hurting church leaders get the help they need before they crash and burn. "An ounce of prevention," we might call it. This is an urgent and compelling need.

Leaders Taking Flight

I am a self-professing "leadership-aholic." I love leading. I love reading about leadership and studying other leaders. In this book, I liken the leadership assignment to a flight assignment; leaders and coleaders as pilots and copilots. The similarities are fascinating.

While I love to fly, I am not a pilot. I have controlled planes from the right seat numerous times, as friends have transported me to speaking engagements via small private aircraft. I enjoy "elite" status on multiple airlines because of the frequency of my commercial travel. My father, James Eagle Henderson, was an Air Force bomber pilot. I grew up hearing wonderful

stories about military flight. I was recruited by the Air Force Academy but chose Bible college and seminary instead. So I am familiar with and enjoy studying flying. I have read books about planes and famous flights. And in the process of writing this book, I have conferred with various pilots and flight instructors.

The metaphor fits for most pastors and business leaders: Most of our lives are composed of numerous leadership flights. Some business executives may stay with the same company for decades; others have numerous shorter leadership assignments in various locations and settings. An experienced educator, civic leader, government official, or business manager may piece together an array of leadership flights that have made up a career.

For pastors, the average tenure in Protestant churches has declined to just four years, according to George Barna.² So most pastors will have numerous leadership flights in their ministry career. Some have fewer, longer flights. I followed one pastor in Sacramento, California, whose leadership flight in one church lasted forty years.

Some pastoral leaders are involved in several flights at once. My friend Leith Anderson has been the senior pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, for more than thirty years. During a portion of that time, he also served as interim president of Denver Seminary, and a few years ago became president of the National Association of Evangelicals while continuing as senior pastor. Leith is a capable guy, “in flight” on numerous assignments at the same time.

Flight and Leadership

In brief, I see numerous parallels between flying and leading:

- *Training and Qualification.* Just as pilots must be trained, be equipped, and earn a license and certification, so leaders must be equipped and qualified to lead effectively. Formal education can be a part of this preparation, though not always. Mentoring, proven service, and faithful character are essential for the growing leader. We find these biblical specifics in 1 Timothy 3:1–8 and Titus 1, given for those who take

on the primary leadership roles in the church. These traits are good qualifiers for Christian leaders in any realm of service.

- *Passion and Perseverance.* Most pilots learn to fly because of a passion for the skies. Experienced pilots have persevered, logging hours and increasing their certification in order to excel in the skills of flying larger and more sophisticated aircraft. Leaders also have a God-given desire for influencing other people and making a significant difference in the world. Great leaders remain faithful, develop their understanding of leadership principles, and maintain noble character and winning habits.
- *Risk and Reward.* At times flying can be risky. Although commercial flights are statistically the safest way to travel, we all know that the consequences of a mechanical failure or pilot error can be disastrous. Quite literally, lives hang in the balance. Yet the effectiveness and exhilaration of flight makes it worth it. For commercial pilots, helping people travel efficiently whether to conduct vital business, share holidays with family, or enjoy a much-needed vacation has to be fulfilling. Leadership is also risky. Decisions affect many people. And like pilots, pastors can affect the lives of those in their care. Setbacks, even failure, are possible. Yet, the thrill of leading people to the achievement of a great cause, especially one of eternal significance, is a joy beyond human expression.
- *Responsibility and Accountability.* Of course, experienced pilots carry a serious responsibility for human lives. The bigger the plane, the greater the volume of precious human cargo. As a result, pilots are accountable to strict standards of flight protocol, personal discipline, and compliance with regulations. Pastors are accountable also. Spiritual leaders influence people and, according to James 3:1, have a greater accountability for how they lead and what they teach. There are no solo flights in leadership.
- *Objectivity and Trust.* The best pilots learn to trust their instruments, the information from ground control, and the proven technology necessary for safe and trouble-free flight. Good leaders must also learn to trust objective indicators, including God's authoritative, holy Word,

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for their leadership flight. When self-trust and emotional justifications outweigh the proven realities for effective leadership, destructive behavior and disaster happen. Leaders lose altitude. People are at risk. Too often, a crash occurs and the human casualties are devastating.

Using the flight analogy, I've written this book to help pastors and other leaders maintain their leadership altitude in a world that wants to bring us down. I believe the biggest challenges to an effective and enduring leadership flight are our own flawed perceptions, subjective emotions, and misjudgments that can put us in real danger.

God wants us to soar and has provided an indispensable instrument panel for our success and endurance as leaders. It's time, with God's help and our commitment, to defy gravity.

Part 1

Avoiding Leadership

Vertigo

Discouragement is a temporary loss of perspective.

ANONYMOUS

*But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions,
do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*

2 TIMOTHY 4:5



Unexpected Leadership Storms

Several large, complex textbooks lay open on my desk as I write this chapter. Each is used to train pilots for private and commercial instrument flight. In the early chapters these texts always address human factors. First and foremost, the pilot must understand his personal vulnerability to disorientation and human error.

Next, these textbooks deal early and extensively with the challenges of unpredictable and dangerous weather. Pilots typically do well in clear and calm conditions. Unpredictable and unanticipated environmental conditions test a pilot's skill and knowledge. Dealing with these threats is foundational to becoming a pilot. Icing, thunderstorms, wind shear, lightning, fog, and many other dynamics threaten safe flight. Pilots are required to obtain weather reports, study the atmosphere, and fly with extreme awareness and caution. Still, bad weather happens, equipment fails, and communication gets confused. Danger lurks in the skies.

Leadership is tested in storms. You may be in the midst of one as you read this book. If not, you will be soon. Storms come with leadership. The names and circumstances are surely different for all of us, but the perplexity and pain are essentially the same. You may be a pastor in a hurting and

dysfunctional church or an executive who's navigating an unprecedented downturn in the financial stability of the company. You might be serving as a community leader, trying to deal with unfriendly and needless opposition. Maybe you are trying to lead a family through a complex maze of conflict, hurt, and confusion.

Whatever the situation, leaders have to learn to navigate and survive the storms. I remember many years ago while still in college hearing a businessman say, "I pay people according to the problems they can solve and the pain they can endure." At the time, I knew the statement was profound but I had little understanding of how problems and pain were so germane to leadership. Now I understand the reality of this wisdom.

Just as pilots avoid storms by flying around them or even landing the plane beyond the thunderheads, leaders are wise to steer clear of threatening situations. But often raging storms are unavoidable. When a storm comes, leaders must know how to manage their own thoughts and emotions so they can make decisions in a way that those entrusted to their care are safe and growing toward the objectives God has established for their lives. Sadly, there are still those rare occasions when a leadership storm results in disaster for a leader, his family, and those he leads.

Holding the Black Box

In most media reports of plane crashes, we hear about the infamous "black box." Actually, this is a reference to two different instruments, normally located in the tail end of the plane. One is the cockpit voice recorder, and the other is the flight data recorder. These black boxes are essential in discovering the cause of an aviation accident, as well as providing plane manufacturers and government agencies vital information to help make air travel as safe as possible. Fireproof and impact proof, the boxes are built and located to survive a disaster, even when little else does.

I guess you could say that on two occasions I was left holding the "black box" after a leadership crash. In both cases, lessons would emerge about what went wrong and how to prevent similar disasters in the future.

I've had the privilege of stepping into three megachurch settings as the new senior pastor at high-risk moments. Each experience was marked by incredible stress. But all involved some wonderful people who have enriched my life in countless ways. Through these parishoners, their stories, and the journey God was taking us on, valuable lessons for avoiding a leadership crash emerged—the nine truths found in part 2 of this book.

You read about the first situation in the introduction. The church spotlighted in the *Los Angeles Times* that Tuesday morning eventually called me as their next senior pastor. This is the rest of the story: In addition to the tragedy of the previous pastor's moral failure, the congregation was embroiled in a multimillion dollar lawsuit over a church discipline case. In the year between my predecessor's resignation and my arrival, the church lost hundreds of attendees and experienced severe reductions in the budget. At the ripe age of thirty, I was in way over my head.

The second church knew the privilege of a faithful, Bible-loving senior pastor who served the congregation as their only pastor for forty years. I had the challenge—and pleasure—of being the guy to follow in his footsteps. (This gracious leader stayed in the church supporting me the entire eleven years of my pastoral ministry.) Despite being “the rookie” showing up after this seasoned pro, God did a profound work in this northern California church. We saw significant renewal and growth as the church planted daughter congregations and increased our impact literally around the world. The highlight of that assignment was a powerful prayer movement that sparked transformation in thousands of lives, launched several national conferences, and eventually led to the formation of the organization I lead today, Strategic Renewal.

The third assignment was the toughest. A congregation in the Midwest had relocated to a new campus in 2002. On their sixty-two acres they built a large, beautiful facility that included a worship center seating more than four thousand. In spite of the generosity of the congregation toward this project, a devalued U.S. stock market following the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 left many unable to fulfill their pledges. The church was left with a multimillion dollar mortgage and \$10 million short in their cash campaign for the building. Then, only a few weeks after moving into the new facility, church members were jolted by the revelation that their enterprising

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pastor of fifteen years was engaged in an extramarital affair. The people were devastated.

About a year later, I was called as the next pastor of this hurting megachurch. Again, God's work of spiritual renewal saved the day as we faithfully taught His Word and aggressively sought Him on our knees. The Lord was so gracious to us. Today I have the joy of returning a couple times a year for ministry, and visiting my dear and faithful friends, since the church supports me as one of their missionaries. They are growing again under the leadership of their new pastor.

Lessons from the Black Box

In both the first and last assignments, I came into a situation where I had to analyze and deal with the “black box” of a leadership failure. By God's grace, I had to discern the cause and effects of an embarrassing and hurtful crash. There were lessons to learn here—lessons about brokenness, grace, prayer, determination, and restoration.

There were also lessons to learn about leadership. Just as the “black box” on a plane will help you understand what went wrong, so the task of sorting through the ashes of a leadership failure provides powerful lessons about keeping other leaders in the air. A few observations stand out:

- *Most leaders stay in flight in spite of the difficulties.* It is a point of optimism and gratitude that most leaders fly straight and end well. For every story of a leadership disaster, there are hundreds of faithful Christian leaders who serve with honor and humility every day. They strive to walk with Christ, love their spouses, care for their families, and faithfully lead those entrusted to their care.
- *No flight plan expects to end in disaster.* Good men and women, seeking to obey the call of God and make a difference in this world, begin this leadership journey every day. They want to fly and finish respectably. Unfortunately, storms and stresses begin to take a toll. Improper self-management takes them off course. Over time, leaders can find themselves in places of discouragement and defeat they never imagined would occur.

- *Many leaders don't realize when they are in trouble.* In recent decades, larger aircraft have been required to utilize a piece of equipment called the ground proximity warning system (GPWS). When planes get too close to the ground or the surrounding terrain, the system provides instructions for evasive maneuvers such as “Terrain! Terrain! Pull up! . . .” along with a warning horn. This equipment has dramatically reduced the number of accidents for planes flying over unfamiliar terrain, or too close to the ground.

God has provided a kind of GPWS for leaders. It is the voice of conscience, which alerts us to issues of moral compromise. But over time human beings can become dull to this voice. Many who crash are in a pattern of self-deception, flying entirely without that objective sense of how close to the ground they really are. This, again, is where objective input and the right leadership “instruments” are vital.

- *God has provided everything a leader needs to stay in flight and land the leadership plane successfully.* This book is really not about leadership crashes but leadership success. The key is the commitment of a leader to utilize the “instrument panel” and the related warning systems through which the sufficiency of the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the people of God can flow into the very being of a leader to keep him in flight and on course for the good of the passengers and the glory of God.
- *Leaders who experience and tolerate spiritual disorientation will crash and burn.* Just as skilled, intelligent, experienced pilots flying sophisticated aircraft can become disoriented, so leaders can unintentionally get into a situation where up seems down, left seems right, and backward seems forward. Understanding the dynamics of disorientation then learning how to avoid it is vital for the leader who wants to soar. For a leader already caught in a subjective downward spiral, a dose of encouraging objectivity with a fresh vision of the “instruments” is a matter of ministry life or death.

No leader ever wants to be in a situation where he is holding the black box of a previous disaster. The pain of dealing with wounded people,

shattered dreams, and devastated relationships is overwhelming. Yet, amid the rubble, God is good to instruct, heal, and restore hope.

Peter, Paul, and Learning to Soar

Of course, the greater reality is that God has given every leader everything necessary to truly soar in their influence and example. Peter, a flawed leader who was restored and empowered by the truth and Spirit of God, wrote to remind us of Christ's sufficiency for our calling: "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1:3-4).

As we will see, Paul understood the reality of leadership storms. In Romans 8 he spoke of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and even the sword, or the threat of death through martyrdom. Quoting from the Old Testament, he testified that we are "accounted as sheep for the slaughter" (Romans 8:36). These were realistic expectations for Christ-followers in the first century, and especially for leaders. Yet, he gives us this powerful promise, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).

One thing I appreciate about the apostle Paul is the way in which he always kept expectations realistic for his followers. He warned them of suffering and tribulation as an essential part of the journey.

In following the sacrificial model of his Savior, Paul became very familiar with the trials and perils of genuine discipleship and leadership. Even in the moments surrounding his conversion and calling, Jesus would reveal to him "how many things he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16). Throughout his leadership he faced persecution, mockery, and threats of death.

It comes as no surprise when Paul pours his heart out to his son in the faith, Timothy, that he reminds him of the sufferings of discipleship and

the storms of leadership. In his final and very personal leadership letter to Timothy, he writes, “I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” (see 2 Timothy 1:12). Speaking extensively again of this suffering and afflictions, he reminds Timothy and all of us of the reality that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Of course, Paul gives a reality check in this last letter of his life as he warns leaders of the “perilous times” ahead. Using some metaphors from his own day, he urges his disciple to remain unencumbered like a dedicated soldier, play by the rules like a winning athlete, and expect a harvest like a faithful farmer (2 Timothy 2:1–7). Of course, planes and pilots did not exist in Paul’s day, but I can almost hear him also say, “Endure unexpected storms like a skilled pilot.”

Paul understood the risks and responsibilities of an enduring leader. He passed these perspectives on to Timothy with clarity and honesty. When we embrace these truths, we are able to defy gravity and become effective leaders.

Keys to Survive and Thrive

Let’s learn the vital lessons from Paul that will help us soar in the leadership flights of our lives. Remember that Paul was speaking to a young man rattled by fear in the face of leadership challenges. He told Timothy not to give in to fear but to focus on power, love, and self-discipline.

But note the *final* advice Paul ever gave to anyone in recorded Scripture. He spoke it in the same breath in which he referred to his imminent death. Not only was it the key to Timothy’s leadership performance but it is pivotal to our navigation of leadership storms: “As for you, be calm and cool and steady, accept and suffer unflinchingly every hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fully perform all the duties of your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5 AMP). The New Living Translation reads: “But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don’t be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you.”

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So here it is. If we are going to defy gravity and soar above the unexpected storms of leadership, it is imperative to keep a calm, clear, and steady perspective as we endure the certain suffering of the call. We must keep on course. We must be faithful to the mission assigned to us. We must complete the flight safely. Paul did. As he said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

Paul finished his leadership flight. He endured incredible storms. He safely landed the plane. He was passionate to help us do the same.

The Discipline of Successful Flying

At 7:52 the morning of May 20, 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh took off in his single-engine plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, from Roosevelt Field near New York City. Flying northeast along the coast, he traversed Nova Scotia and Newfoundland before heading across the Atlantic Ocean, attempting history’s first successful trans-Atlantic flight.

Lindbergh’s attempt captured the imagination of the public like few events in history. Americans waited nervously by their radios, listening for news of the flight. Thirty-four hours after his departure from New York, a frenzied crowd of 150,000 people cheered his landing at Le Bourget Field in Paris.¹

In a personal account of a crucial moment in his epic journey, Lindbergh wrote about his encounter with a potential storm:

A pillar of clouds block out the stars ahead, spilling over on top like a huge mushroom in the sky. . . . In the seconds that intervene while I approach, I make the mental and physical preparation for blind flying. The body must be informed sternly that the mind will take complete control. The senses must be drafted and lined up in the strictest discipline, while logic replaces instinct as commander. . . . The muscles must obey the mind’s decision no matter how wrong it seems to them. If the eyes imagine the flicker of a star below where they think the horizon ought to be, if the ears report the engine’s tempo too slow for level flight, if the nerves say the seat back’s pressure is increasing

(as it does in a climb), the hand and the feet must still be loyal to the order of the mind. It is a terrific strain on the mind also when it turns from long-proven bodily instincts to the cold, mechanical impartiality of needles moving over dials.

Then, using language almost reminiscent of the advice of the apostle Paul, Lindbergh offers a word of warning to those of us who intend to survive physical—and emotional—storms:

If the senses get excited and out of control, the plane will follow them, and that can be fatal. If the senses break rank while everything is going right, it may be impossible, with the plane falling dizzily and needles running wild, to bring them back into line, reinstruct them, and force them to gain control while everything is going wrong. It would be like rallying a panicked army under the fire of an advancing enemy. Like an army under fire, blind flying requires absolute discipline. This must be fully understood before it starts.²

In aviation and in Christian leadership, storms are inevitable. Survival is not guaranteed, but it's highly probable for those who are prepared, those who keep their eyes on the instruments and trust the things they know to be true. As Christian leaders, we can trust those truths given to us by the One who called us—who in every way will help us *soar*.

Your feelings cannot be trusted as the final authority on what the airplane is doing. Your mind is boss. The instruments are your window on reality, and you desperately need to understand the data they provide. . . . Our feelings, indulged without examination, will kill us.

ERIC NOLTE

Commercial pilot, flight instructor, and author

Lean on, trust in, and be confident in the Lord with all your heart and mind and do not rely on your own insight or understanding.

PROVERBS 3:5 (AMP)

