LEADERSHIP REFLECTION:
LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES THAT WEAR WELL

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In one role or another—employee, parishioner, professor, administrator—I have had a long-standing interest in why some people make good leaders and others do not. Partly from watching leaders—the effective ones as well as the ineffective ones—and partly from reflecting on my own experiences as a leader, I have settled on certain core principles that guide me in my everyday interaction with colleagues and staff members. In no particular order, I present them here for reflection.

A few of the principles are overtly "Christian" in that they derive specifically from my grasp of the Scriptures as well as my moral and faith commitments. The others are compatible with my core theological and moral convictions, and they underlie certain practices that I have come to regard as quite sensible. However, I have never tried to trace them to a specific biblical mandate or give a proof text for them.

1. Credible leaders build trust. In my view, trust is the fundamental currency in any organization. If this is true, then it is important for leaders to figure out what it takes to build and to maintain trust. They do so for at least two reasons. First, they do so because it is the pragmatic thing to do. Over the long haul, building and maintaining trust is the best way to get things done. Second and more important, they do so as an expression of their own integrity. Trust is built and maintained in several ways, including keeping one's promises, protecting weaker parties, acting fairly, and exercising the courage to require others to do the same.

2. Credible leaders model what they want others to do. This is true with regard both to attitudes and patterns of behavior. For example, effective Christian leaders model compassion, tolerance, respect, integrity, and other virtues.[1] This list of virtues could be expanded by examining what Jesus says in the Beatitudes and what St. Paul says about the fruit of the Spirit. And, of course, the principle of reciprocity that is expressed here lies at the heart of the "Golden Rule." But the central point is this: effective Christian leaders establish and espouse standards and principles that they themselves are prepared to live by.[2]

3. Wise leaders empower other people. In one sense, this is simply a good management principle. You are likely to get the most out of people if you establish clear and realistic standards for them to follow, give them the resources they need to complete the task, and then send them on their way to do it without interfering with them. In another sense, the statement expresses the larger purpose—could we say, mandate—to help other people to bring to full expression the gifts and abilities that their Creator has entrusted to them. Empowering other people means functioning more as a facilitator than as a commander. To me, the process of empowering other people lies at the heart of what is sometimes called "servant leadership."[3]

4. Effective leaders celebrate others' accomplishments. If the tasks of an organization are important – and surely the fundamental tasks of church, business, and university are important – they require enormous expenditures of energy to do them well. Effective leaders find ways to recognize and reward hard work. They look for opportunities for others to succeed and to be celebrated. Doing so builds the esteem of those being recognized, nurtures collegiality and loyalty, and calls forth renewed effort, all of which are important when tasks are multidimensional, complex, protracted, or require teamwork.

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[1] A virtue is a good habit, a relatively fixed disposition to behave in an excellent way. Western culture is rich with readings on the virtues. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of the most notable early sources in the Greco-Roman tradition. Important sources in the Judeo-Christian tradition include Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, qq 49-64.

[2] The classical philosophical expression of the principle of reciprocity appears in Immanuel Kant's statement of the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means." See *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), translated by James W. Ellington, 36.

[3] Servant leadership does not always flow strictly from the top. Sometimes it flows – or ought to flow – from a much more precarious place in the organization: the middle. For this reason, I believe that it is important to think about a notable leadership principle that has special application to mid-level leaders: astute leaders know their place in the organization. Thus, it is important to ask the following: What are the organization's explicit and implicit protocols? What is the difference between the organization's "rational" structure (expressed, for example, in its organizational chart) and its "political" structure? Who has power and who does not? Successful mid-level leaders discern the answers to these questions. The answers provide important clues to where and how they fit into the organization and help them appreciate the extent as well as the limits of their own power. See Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

5. Effective leaders explore fundamental questions. We often hear that leaders should pursue something called "best practices." I acknowledge the value of best practices. At the same time—and perhaps this is a bit of the philosopher in me coming out—I think it is often better to focus less attention on best practices than on discerning the right questions. Doing so helps us avoid mimicking what other people do and forces us to consider the appropriateness of the "best practices" to the concrete situation that we inhabit.

6. Effective Christian leaders articulate a vision for the future, inspire others to adopt the vision as their own, and elicit their support to fulfill it. My own strategy for eliciting "buy in" is by building personal relations with colleagues and staff members. I find that I am most effective at stimulating the imagination of colleagues and staff members, building consensus, and eliciting their support when I talk with them quietly, face-to-face, and behind the scenes. In my experience, much good vision casting and consensus building goes on over a cup of coffee. While there is nothing theologically significant about coffee (I know this news will come as a shock to some of my closest friends), building relationships around acts of hospitality (often centered on sharing food) is an ancient Christian practice.[4]

7. Effective leaders practice Sabbath living. Authentic Sabbath living is much more than a Sunday activity. Properly done, it also lends structure and meaning to all of our activities in the other six days of the week. But integrating Sabbath rhythms into daily life involves careful preparation and follow-through. It requires that we thoughtfully and deliberately make choices that nurture it as a way of life. Dorothy Bass describes Sabbath living as practices of "leaning deliberately into the wind."[5] Such practices ground us and help us resist the forces that hurry us on to distraction. We "lean into the wind" when we
   - Set aside a quiet moment to pray, reflect on a passage of Scripture, or consider the words of a thoughtful author
   - Arrive at our place of work before most other people, take a few minutes to welcome the day, and ask how do today's activities fit with my larger set of priorities?
   - Make room in our daily schedule to nurture relationships with people that matter to us, including family and close friends
   - Take time on a regular basis for self-care, including emotional and physical rest, as well as spiritual renewal

   These kinds of moments—and others besides—provide points of stability and reference that orient us in our otherwise busy schedules. I am convinced that Christian leaders cannot flourish in their careers unless they also flourish as persons and that, in the long run, they cannot flourish as persons unless they

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[4] On the subject of Christian practices, see Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) and Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

[5] Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

intentionally incorporate Sabbath rhythms into their daily routines. This is so because Sabbath living is central to renewing one's vision, maintaining appropriate priorities, and resisting the temptation to succumb to the tyranny of the urgent.[6]

Seven principles—I make no pretense that the list is comprehensive; nor do I suggest that this brief discussion constitutes an adequate template for a full orbed theory of leadership. But for me these principles have worn well—by which I mean I feel comfortable living by them in the workplace, explaining them to other people, and using them as a basis for making decisions.

About the Author

Dr. Michael Palmer is a professor of philosophy and dean of Regent University's School of Divinity. A native of Missoula, Mont., his university education includes B.A. and M.A. degrees in philosophy from the University of Montana. He completed his Ph.D. in philosophy at Marquette University in1984, specializing in ancient philosophy (Plato). From 2003 to 2006 he served as the director of *Project Envision: Discovering a Life of Christian Service and Leadership*, a five-year initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment and designed to help students and faculty explore the relationships between faith and vocation. The 2002 winner of Evangel University's E.M. and Estella Clark Award for Excellence in Teaching, Scholarship, and Service, Dr. Palmer has been listed five times in *Who's Who Among America's Teachers*. He has published numerous philosophical articles and two books, including *Elements of a Christian Worldview*. He is currently co-editing *The Berkshire Encyclopedia of Religion and Social Justice*.
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[6] I have found the following resources useful in stimulating my thinking about Sabbath living: Lauren F. Wimmer, *Mudhouse Sabbath* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2003); Kathleen Norris, *Dakota; A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993, 2001); R. Paul Stevens, *Seven Days of Faith: Every Day Alive with God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001); Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999); Wendell Barry, *The Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998).

Establishing my own leadership philosophy has helped me understand my own principles, as well as the philosophy of other leaders. My Leadership Philosophy. Get the right people working on the right thing in the right way â€" and get everything else out of their way. The above statement is what I distilled from the principles below. It summarizes what I consider to be my key beliefs and how I view leadership, incorporating my core principles. Leadership for me really is about getting the right people, creating a vision for what weâ€™re doing and helping establish the criteria and roadmap for success. And then getting things (and often yourself) out of the way. I didnâ€™t start out with this summary though. Leaders who work with me to shape and commit to such a practice are better able to tap into their highest potential for creativity, vitality, and success. I often tell my clients that a daily practice of self-reflection strengthens self-awareness and will enable them to make better choices. Leaders who work with me to shape and commit to such a practice are better able to tap into their highest potential for creativity, vitality, and success. Daily self-reflection requires radical honesty or Silicon Valleyâ€™s buzzword radical candor. Unfortunately, social norms often seem to encourage the opposite. On social media, we predominantly encounter positive posts as others present only the most positive sides of themselves and their lifestyle. We are ju