

Preparing for Godly Advancement

Seven Things I Wish I Had Known as I Advanced in Leadership

Early in my career, I hired a man as the supervisor of a group of about ten design drafters. Until then, he had been an individual contributor. He knew the work and had good relationships with the people around him, but after becoming their supervisor, he had great difficulty giving direction.

He still wanted to be one of the guys and to be liked. When someone needed correction or the work needed clearer direction, he held back. He was a good person, but he never made that transition and ultimately did not succeed in the position.

Later in my career, I worked with a woman in a fairly high-level position that required her to give direction to many people, including men. She had been successful in another field, where she worked exclusively with women. In this new setting, she somehow came to believe that she needed to 'lead like a man,' which meant to her that she needed to become harder and more forceful than she naturally was.

As we talked, I asked her what had made her successful before. We began to see that she had moved away from some of her greatest strengths. She did not need a new personality. She needed to lead as herself. When she began doing that again, her leadership changed, and she became much more effective. The lesson was not that all women lead one way and all men another. The lesson was that she had stopped leading from who she really was.

These two people struggled in opposite directions. One never fully stepped into the authority of his new role. The other tried to become

someone she was not. Both remind me that a new position can come quickly, but it takes time to understand what the new work asks of us.

When I speak of advancement, I do not mean grasping for a larger title. I mean being ready when God or the circumstances of life place more people, more work, or wider influence in our hands. As I look back over my own years of leadership, seven lessons stand out. These are things I wish I had understood earlier.

1. As Responsibility Grows, Grow in Leading People

I was trained as an engineer. Early in my career, much of my contribution came from knowing how to solve problems, develop plans, make decisions, and get the work done. Those abilities mattered, and they continued to matter throughout my career.

My friend and mentor Paul Stanley gave me helpful language for understanding what needed to change. He described the difference between leadership hardware and leadership software.

Leadership hardware includes the knowledge and practical skills needed to do the work: technical expertise and the ability to plan, develop sound strategies, solve problems, manage resources, set standards, and follow through.

Leadership software is the way we work with people. It includes self-awareness, emotional intelligence, listening well, communicating clearly, building trust, helping people grow, and caring for the culture. It also includes dealing with situations that cannot be resolved by a technical answer alone. These are sometimes called soft skills, but the word soft can make them sound optional. They are not.

This was a difficult adjustment for me. More than once, I tried to apply a technical solution to a people problem. I could see an answer and wanted to go directly toward it. I created a better process when a conversation was needed. I sometimes arrived with an answer before trust had been built.

Facts alone do not restore trust. A sound plan does not automatically create commitment. People are not problems to be solved.

The technical side of leadership never stopped mattering. I still needed to understand the work and make sure it was done well. But as my role broadened, more of my effectiveness depended on how I worked with people.

2. Listen Before You Change Things

Jesus told His disciples:

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”

Matthew 10:16 NIV

When I picture a serpent entering unfamiliar territory, I see it staying low, watching, and taking in its surroundings before moving ahead. For me, this means that when I enter a new setting, I need to look and listen before assuming I understand it.

Each new position placed me in the middle of work that had been underway long before I arrived. The people there had already been solving problems and learning from experience. Before deciding what should be different, I needed to understand why things had developed as they had.

When I was promoted to lead a utilities organization of approximately 190 people, I met individually with thirty-five leaders. I wanted to know four things:

1. What is working well, and what has helped it succeed?
2. What are the people here most proud of?
3. What should we be careful not to lose?
4. What do the people closest to the work know that I still need to learn?

I listened carefully and took notes. Some things needed attention, but before deciding what to adjust, I had to see clearly what was already there.

3. Use Your Strengths Differently as Responsibility Grows

The experience at Los Alamos also helped me see that it was not only my leadership approach that needed to change. Some of my strongest tendencies needed to mature as my responsibilities grew.

One leadership assessment described something I already recognized in myself: I had a strong bias toward action. I enjoyed getting things moving. Once I had a reasonable amount of information, I would usually rather begin and learn along the way than continue discussing every possibility.

As an individual contributor, that tendency served me well. I could see what needed to be done and move quickly toward it. It brought energy to my work and helped me accomplish a great deal.

When I began leading others, the same quality could work against me. I might be ready to act, but the people around me had not necessarily received the same information or had the same amount of time to consider the situation. They sometimes needed more context and preparation before they could move confidently.

If I pushed ahead too quickly, what felt decisive to me could feel unsettling to them.

The answer was not to lose my bias toward action. It was part of how God had made me and remained one of my contributions. I needed to use it in a way that helped other people understand the direction and succeed with me.

Our strengths do not always appear in mature form. Greater responsibility places more weight upon them and reveals where they still need to grow. The question is not whether we should stop being ourselves. It is how the best of who we are can mature as our influence expands.

4. Accept Accountability for the Whole

When I first became a supervisor, my attention was naturally focused on the individual contributors I led and the work we needed to accomplish together. Later, I began supervising people who led groups of their own.

As my responsibility grew, I had to widen my view. It was no longer enough to think only about the people and work entrusted directly to me. I needed to understand how our decisions affected the rest of the organization.

A choice that helped my group could make the work harder somewhere else. A priority that seemed right from where I sat might not be the most important priority for the organization as a whole. I still had to care well for what was in my hands, but my accountability reached beyond it.

I saw this most clearly while serving as Chief Operating Officer at Colorado Springs Utilities. At the senior leadership table, I could not simply advocate for the functions that reported to me. I shared accountability for the health of the entire organization. Sometimes that meant supporting a decision that was harder for my own group because it was right for the whole.

Responsibility tells us what has been placed directly in our hands. Accountability calls us to care about the whole.

5. Ask Questions. Pull the String.

Over the years, I have learned that the first answer is rarely the whole answer. When someone brings me a problem or tells me what they want to do, it can be tempting to respond immediately. Often, it is better to slow down and ask one more question.

Many people describe this as pulling the string. We gently follow the first answer:

- Tell me more.

- Why does that matter to you?
- What do you think is underneath that?

Each answer may lead to another question, taking us toward what I call the deeper why.

Suppose someone tells me, “I enjoy helping new employees.” I might ask why. The person may say, “I like seeing them gain confidence.” If I ask why that matters, I may hear, “Because I remember how uncertain I felt when I started, and one person took the time to help me.”

Now the conversation is no longer just about training new employees. It has revealed gratitude and a desire to give someone else what was once given to them. The first answer described an activity. The deeper answer revealed something about the person’s heart.

The same approach can help us understand problems. What first appears to be carelessness may turn out to be conflicting direction. What looks like resistance may come from a concern about losing something important. If we stop with the first explanation, we may respond to the wrong issue.

Jesus often asked questions that helped people recognize and express what was happening within them. Good questions show respect. They give people room to think and often bring forward something we would never have discovered by giving advice too quickly.

Pulling the string is not an interrogation, and it is not a way of leading someone toward an answer we have already chosen. It means listening closely enough to let one answer guide the next question. Sometimes the situation is clear and action is needed. In other cases, patient curiosity keeps us from acting on only part of the story.

6. Pay Attention to the Next Level of Leadership

Excellence, commitment, and shared values do not spread through an organization by accident. They are carried through relationships, one level at a time. If I wanted those qualities to reach beyond the people who reported directly to me, I had to pay attention to how they were leading the people entrusted to them.

A good working relationship with one of my direct reports did not tell me what it felt like to work for that person. Someone could work well with me and consistently meet expectations while leaving the people they led discouraged, confused, or unheard. If I looked only at results and at my own experience with that leader, I could miss an important part of the picture.

One way I stayed close to what was happening was to ask my direct reports simple questions about the people they led:

1. What do you see as this person's greatest strength?
2. What challenges are you facing with this person right now?
3. What opportunities are you providing to help this person stretch and grow?

Their answers helped me see whether they really knew their people and were intentionally helping them develop.

These conversations served another purpose. They helped my direct reports look beyond their own performance and take responsibility for the people entrusted to them. I was not going around them or trying to manage their people. I was helping them lead at another level and encouraging them to have similar conversations with the leaders who reported to them.

When I became aware of an unhealthy pattern, I needed to address it. Sometimes that meant helping a leader prepare for a difficult conversation. At other times, I needed to name the concern directly and expect something to change.

Personally stewarding these relationships did not mean knowing every detail. It meant asking enough to understand how people were being led, not simply whether the work was getting done. Both mattered.

7. Stay Little in Your Own Eyes

A promotion or new title can change the way people respond to us. We may be invited into rooms we could not enter before. People may listen to us differently, and we may receive courtesies that belong more to the position than to us personally. It is easy to mistake that response for proof of our own importance.

The work we have done often helps prepare us for advancement, but none of us gets there alone. Other people have taught us, trusted us, opened doors, and contributed to whatever we have accomplished. Scripture places advancement in an even larger perspective:

“No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt themselves. It is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.”

Psalm 75:6–7 NIV

That truth does not make preparation or hard work unimportant. It simply keeps them in perspective. Any opportunity we receive is something to steward, not evidence that we have become more valuable than anyone else.

King Saul is a sobering example. When Samuel confronted him, he reminded Saul that he had once been “small in his own eyes” (1 Samuel 15:17 NIV). Saul began with humility, but over time he became more concerned with protecting his position and pleasing people than with obeying God. What had been entrusted to him became something he tried to hold on to, and eventually that became his undoing.

Staying little in our own eyes does not mean thinking poorly of ourselves or shrinking from authority. It means remembering that a title is not the source of our value and that the work does not depend

upon us alone. Everything we have has been given to us, and anything worthwhile we accomplish involves the contribution of other people.

A title may give us authority, but it cannot give us character or earn trust on our behalf. We still need to listen, receive correction, admit when we are wrong, and give other people credit for what they contribute.

Positions eventually pass to someone else. Our task is to use the position we have now for the good of the people and the work before us.

A Final Thought

The two people I described at the beginning faced different struggles. One never fully stepped into the authority he had been given. The other tried to become someone she was not. Neither needed a new personality. Each needed to grow into the work while remaining true to who God had made them to be.

For me, these seven lessons come down to something simple. Advancement is about more than moving into a larger role. It is learning to carry more without losing who we are or forgetting whom our leadership is for.

Looking back, I no longer measure advancement mainly by the positions a person has held. I am more interested in what happened in the lives of those entrusted to that person. I once put it this way:

“The aroma of leadership is people living life well because you were there.”

That is the kind of advancement worth preparing for.

Questions to Sit With

1. Where does my present work require more of my leadership software? What do I need to strengthen?

2. If I entered a new position tomorrow, what would I want to understand before changing anything?
3. Which of my signature strengths has most shaped my contribution? How might I need to use it differently now?
4. Where does my accountability need to reach beyond the people and work directly entrusted to me?
5. What question in my life or work needs one more 'why'? What may lie beneath my first answer?
6. How well do I understand the relationships between my direct reports and the people they lead? What question do I need to ask?
7. Do I see my present position as something entrusted to me, or as evidence of my importance? Who has permission to tell me the truth?

Companion Resources

Discovering Your Life Purpose explores the gifts, strengths, experiences, and deeper motivations that shape the contribution each person is made to offer.

The Shepherd's Way offers a fuller picture of developing people and caring for those entrusted to us.

Lighthouse Leadership explores humility and other qualities people need from someone carrying influence, especially when circumstances are difficult.

A Better Measure of Success considers the difference between using a position to serve and asking that position to establish our worth.

Source Notes

The language of leadership hardware and leadership software was shared with me by my friend and mentor Paul Stanley.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Copyright © 2026 Jerry Forte. All rights reserved.