The Shepherd's Way

What I Have Learned About Leading People Well

Introduction

For much of my life, I thought leadership meant having the right answers. That made sense to me as an engineer. Problems had causes, systems could be understood, and careful thinking usually helped. I carried that same approach into family, ministry, and leadership. I believed that if I worked hard, learned enough, and explained the way forward clearly, people and organizations would do well.

Experience taught me otherwise. People are not problems to solve. I could make the right decision and still mishandle someone's heart. I could reach a goal and leave people worn down.

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Growing up around brokenness and instability, I learned to lean on achievement. That helped me become dependable, but it also made pressure feel normal. For a long time, I confused carrying responsibility with caring for people.

Denise has always had unusual wisdom with children. She helped me see that instruction is not enough. Children need connection and the assurance that failure will not cost them the relationship. Adults are not very different.

I have always loved football. When Elise was little, she sat on my lap through countless Broncos games. After "Mom" and "God," one of her earliest words was "Elway."

One afternoon, however, Jonathan was trying to talk and play with me while I watched a game. I remember feeling irritated because I saw him as an interruption. I kept watching while half-listening to him, and I was not doing either very well. Then I sensed the Lord press a thought into my heart: This game will be over soon, and a year from now you probably will not remember who won or lost. But your son is eternal.

The conviction was immediate. I saw how easily I could give my best attention to a task and offer only what remained to the person standing in front of me. Over the years, I have come to recognize that many of life's most important invitations look like interruptions. It may be a child wanting attention, a coworker asking, "Do you have a minute?" or a hurting person hidden behind an ordinary conversation.

Around that time, I began asking a simple question about the people entrusted to me: What do they really need? The answer that has stayed with me is simple: "Hold their heartstrings closely." Those words still call me away from concentrating only on performance and remind me to treat another person's heart with care.

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Why a Shepherd?

As I searched for a better way to think about leadership, I kept returning to the biblical image of a shepherd. David wrote of a shepherd who leads beside still waters and remains near in the darkest valley (Psalm 23). Isaiah pictured God gathering the vulnerable in His arms (Isaiah 40:11). Jesus described Himself as the Good Shepherd who knows those in His care and is willing to lay down His life for them (John 10).

This picture is rooted in my faith, and I have found it helpful anywhere one person is trusted to lead and care for others. Taken together, these passages have given me a simple picture. The people in our care belong first to God. A shepherd stays close enough to know them personally and attentive enough to understand what is happening across the whole flock.

Care cannot remain only a feeling. A shepherd gives direction, provides what is needed, watches for danger, restores those who are hurt or wandering, and follows through. The flock is never there to serve the shepherd. Whatever authority we carry is meant for their good, not our importance. We serve under the authority of the Chief Shepherd and answer to Him for how that trust is carried.

That leaves me with questions I still have to ask myself: Am I trying to prove my value or protect my position? Or am I using what has been entrusted to me for the people and purposes in my care? My motives are not always as clear as I would like them to be.

The picture of a shepherd has helped me understand three parts of leadership that belong together:

- Heart: How We Love
- Character: Who We Are Becoming
- Function: What We Do

The heart reminds us whom our leadership is for and how people should experience our care. Character concerns the kind of person we are becoming and whether responsibility is safe in our hands.

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Function is where love and character become visible in what we do. These are not neat, separate categories. They naturally overlap, and together they shape whether we become people others can trust.

Heart: How We Love

People need more than direction. They need to know that we see them and care about more than what they can produce.

This does not require entering every part of another person's life or trying to meet every need. It calls us to stay close enough to notice what people are carrying and to treat their hearts with care. People do not always open their hearts quickly. Gentleness gives them room to speak without being pushed.

Getting Out Where the Work Is

During my years at Colorado Springs Utilities, I learned that if I did not set aside time to be with employees, other priorities would crowd it out. So I blocked every Thursday afternoon and went where the work was being done.

Some weeks that meant standing in a ditch with a crew or spending time with linemen. Other weeks I sat with customer service representatives, accountants, or employees in one of our facilities. I asked questions, listened, and tried to see things from where they stood. Those afternoons often showed me what no written report could, and they helped me know them better.

When I stayed engaged long enough, people usually began to tell me things I would not otherwise have heard. A concern might surface before it reached the usual channels. A decision that looked sensible from the office might be creating problems in the field. At other times, the conversation gave me a chance to recognize good work or learn more about the person doing it.

Staying close is not an invitation to pry into people's private lives. It means paying attention when something has changed and caring enough to ask. At times, the best question is simply, "How are you really doing?"

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Encouragement is part of shepherding. Many people quietly help hold a family, team, church, or organization together, yet their contributions can easily go unnoticed. A few sincere words can remind them that their faithfulness matters.

For me, loving people this way also includes praying for those entrusted to me. Prayer reminds me that they belong to God before they belong to any organization and that their lives are larger than their roles.

Caring Enough to Protect and Restore

A shepherd also protects those in the flock. At Colorado Springs Utilities, I used to tell every new hire, "Our goal is for you to work your entire career without an accident or incident, and we are going to do everything we can to help make that happen." Safety was more than a rule or a performance measure. It was part of caring for people and for the families who expected them home at the end of the day.

Not every danger is obvious. In an organization or family, harm can grow quietly when disrespect, conflict, or irresponsibility is repeatedly overlooked.

Care does not avoid difficult conversations. When correction is necessary, I want to begin with what actually happened rather than assume another person's motive. Whenever possible, I want to have that conversation privately and soon enough to help. The other person should understand why it matters and what must change.

We must also acknowledge when we have hurt someone. A sincere apology does not defend our motives or hurry another person toward reconciliation. It simply takes responsibility: "I was wrong. I can see how this affected you. I am sorry."

Sometimes a situation requires help beyond what we can give. Abuse, illegal conduct, or threats to safety should be reported to the proper authorities. Love never asks us to hide harm.

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Character: Who We Are Becoming

When I read the shepherd passages, I am struck by how much attention Scripture gives to the character of those entrusted with the care of others. Paul's qualifications for elders and deacons help fill out that picture. They were written for church leaders, but these qualities matter anywhere people place their trust in another person (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1).

Each responsibility calls for its own knowledge and skills. It also raises two deeper questions: What will this require of me, and what will it reveal about me?

Humility can make authority useful to others. Insecurity can make it defensive or controlling. Ability may carry us into a responsibility our character is not ready to bear, and those around us often live with the consequences.

I have seen a larger role bring insecurity and control closer to the surface. I have also watched the weight of caring for others make people more tender. They have become better listeners and less interested in protecting an image. In both cases, what was already being formed within them has come to light.

Christlike character is not simply avoiding obvious failure. It is learning to use strength as Jesus did, for others rather than for ourselves. Greater responsibility can play tricks on us. People may listen more closely or treat us differently because of the position. We can begin to think their response is about us rather than the role we hold.

I have had to remind myself that authority is a trust, not a measure of my importance. Whatever I have accomplished has depended on the gifts and faithfulness of many other people.

That is why the life no one sees matters. A title or ability may open a door, but neither can make us trustworthy. Do I keep my word? Do I tell the truth? Can I receive correction? Can I ask forgiveness without defending myself? Those quiet choices prepare us for responsibilities we may not yet see.

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Gentleness is sometimes mistaken for weakness. I have come to see it as strength that has learned restraint. It allows us to be clear without being cruel and firm without becoming controlling. People should be able to bring a concern or difficult question without bracing themselves for retaliation.

Authority also requires accountability. We need people who are free to question us. Those around us must have somewhere safe to turn when the person above them is part of the problem. None of us should be the only judge of our own conduct.

Character does not replace competence. People deserve leaders who understand the work and continue learning. Skill helps us carry the work well. Character helps make authority safe in our hands.

Character Under Pressure

There are seasons when extraordinary effort is necessary. Trouble begins when an emergency pace becomes our ordinary way of living. Eventually, our health, families, judgment, or joy pay the price.

Because achievement once helped me feel secure, I have had to ask myself difficult questions. Am I pressing people because the moment truly requires urgency, or because pressure has become familiar to me? Am I resisting counsel because the idea is unwise, or because it was not mine? Am I still serving the work, or am I asking it to prove my value?

Prayer, Scripture, and the principle of Sabbath have been essential for me. Together they remind me that the work does not depend entirely upon me and that my value is not measured only by what I accomplish. Renewal may also come through time outdoors or an unhurried day with family and friends.

Rest gives us room to notice what is happening within us. If I do not face my own wounds, I may begin leading from them. Living at a sustainable pace does not mean avoiding sacrifice or difficult responsibility. It allows us to remain present and capable of love over time.

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Function: What We Do

How we love and who we are becoming should be visible in what we do. Faithful stewardship means taking good care of what God and others have placed in our hands.

In practice, that means setting clear expectations, making timely decisions, and following through on what we say we will do. Shepherding does not lower the standard. It gives people what they need to carry the work well.

People need more than a goal. They need to understand where we are going and how their own work connects with the larger purpose. Pressure may produce activity for a while. Lasting commitment grows when people understand why the work matters and know their contribution is seen. That shared understanding helps people move in the same direction.

Seeing Clearly and Deciding When the Time Comes

Faithful stewardship requires patience to understand what is happening and courage to act when the time comes.

I experienced the consequences of delayed decisions in Los Alamos. The general manager of our company had a habit of putting matters that required action into the lower-left drawer of his desk. Weeks or even months could pass before he responded. Meanwhile, people waited and important work could not move forward. It was enormously frustrating.

I learned that not deciding has consequences of its own. The desire for more information can become a way to avoid responsibility. Part of stewardship is responding within a reasonable time so the work can move forward.

Over the years, I have tried to give each decision the thought and prayer the situation requires within the time available. For some decisions, that may mean weeks. In a crisis, it may mean minutes. The point is not to move too fast or too slow, but to use the time well.

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I try to distinguish between what I know and what I am assuming. Only then do I ask what should happen next. I can see something accurately and still misunderstand what it means. Experience should make me more attentive, not less curious.

Prayer and Scripture help me bring my motives and fears before God. I also examine the information available and listen to those who are close to the situation. Faith does not replace preparation. It keeps me humble and reminds me that I do not see everything.

Confidence should not close the door to honest questions. One of the most useful things I can say is, "This is how I understand the situation, but I want to know what I may be missing." That does not relieve me of the responsibility to decide. It reminds me that I do not see the whole picture alone.

Once I understand as much as I reasonably can, I need to act. Over the years, I have learned to keep track of important matters so they do not disappear beneath other work. People need to know the direction, what they are responsible for, and when we will review progress. I explore this practical side of stewardship more fully in *Practical Guidelines for Getting Things Done*.

Giving Honest Direction

Making a decision is only the beginning. People need honest direction. They do not expect us to know everything, but they do look to us to face what is happening and identify the next step.

During the Waldo Canyon Fire, I was reminded how deeply people need steadiness when fear is high. For roughly five weeks, many of us worked sixteen-hour days, seven days a week. Our leadership team met at six each morning. We stayed close to crews in the field, worked with emergency responders and civic leaders, and communicated publicly several times a day. Conditions changed quickly, and no one had all the information.

We could not wait for complete certainty. We gathered the best information available and listened to those nearest the situation. Then we acted on what the moment required. As new information came in,

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we adjusted. That was not indecision. It was the only honest way to lead while events were unfolding faster than any plan could anticipate.

Reassurance was not enough. People deserved an honest account of what we knew, what remained uncertain, what we were doing, and when they would hear from us again. We established a dependable rhythm for gathering information and communicating decisions. It gave us some steadiness even while the situation kept changing.

The same needs remain in ordinary seasons. People still want to know why their work matters and what deserves their attention now. They need enough clarity to act without returning for permission at every step, along with the freedom to bring unwelcome information. If we punish bad news, we will eventually stop receiving it.

People can live with a great deal of uncertainty when we are honest about it. False confidence is much harder to bear, especially when a leader changes the explanation or disappears after making the decision. When the way is unclear, we owe people the truth, a next step, and our continued presence.

Helping Others Grow

My mentor Paul Stanley invested deeply in my life. He asked questions that made me think and shared wisdom without trying to run my life. He cared about who I was becoming as much as what I was accomplishing.

Most of our time was spent in conversation and prayer, often reflecting on decisions I had made. Paul showed me that giving an answer may solve today's problem, while developing another person's judgment prepares them for situations neither of us can yet see.

That changed the way I worked with others. I did not always need to be the person with the answer. At times it was better to ask what they were seeing, what they believed should happen, and why. A good question can communicate confidence while helping another person learn to carry responsibility.

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Believing in someone eventually means entrusting that person with something that matters. They may take longer than we would or approach the work differently. If we take it back whenever we become uncomfortable, we may finish the task but fail to develop the person. People need room to try, along with honest guidance as they learn.

As I have grown older, another question has come to matter more: Have I passed on what others will need when I am no longer there? Important knowledge and relationships should not remain locked inside one person. Preparing others takes time. It also requires me to be comfortable when someone else is trusted with the work and perhaps does part of it better than I do.

A good measure of leadership is whether the work can be carried well without us.

Becoming Trustworthy

After more than four decades of leadership, I am convinced that people are affected by both our decisions and the spirit in which we make them. They may forget many of the details, but they will remember whether they could tell us the truth, whether we stayed when things became difficult, and whether we cared about more than what they could produce.

I want to remember that leadership is a trust. The people in my care are not possessions or instruments of my success. I want to know them and protect their dignity. Who they are becoming matters as much as what we accomplish together.

With the help of God, I want to become a trustworthy leader, someone who loves people with a shepherd's heart, seeks to reflect Christ's character, and faithfully stewards whatever has been placed in my hands. I hope people are stronger and better prepared because we have walked together.

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A Quiet Look at How I Lead

Optional Reflection

This reflection is not a report card. It is simply a way to look honestly at how people may be experiencing your leadership.

Think about the last six to twelve months. Rate what people have actually experienced with you, especially when you were under pressure. Base each rating on a recent example rather than on what you intended. These statements do not cover every part of shepherd leadership. They are simply a place to begin.

Rating Scale

- 1 — Rarely true
- 2 — Occasionally true
- 3 — Sometimes true
- 4 — Usually true
- 5 — Consistently true

Heart: How I Love

I make regular time to be with people, listen to them, and try to see things from where they stand.	☐
I notice when someone needs encouragement or protection, and I respond with care.	☐
People can bring me difficult news or disagree honestly without fearing damage to the relationship.	☐
When hurt or conflict occurs, I address it directly and seek restoration without diminishing anyone's dignity.	☐

> ***Section total*** _____ / 20

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Character: Who I Am Becoming

My conduct in private is consistent with the values I express in public.	☐
I invite correction and can receive it without becoming defensive or dismissive.	☐
I use authority to serve rather than protect my position or prove my importance.	☐
Under pressure, I remain gentle and self-controlled in the way I treat people.	☐

Section total _____ / 20

Function: What I Do

I take enough time to understand what is happening, but I do not avoid decisions that need to be made.	☐
When the way is uncertain, I communicate honestly about what we know, what remains unclear, and what comes next.	☐
I help people develop their judgment and trust them with meaningful responsibility.	☐
I follow through on the work and take responsibility for the results without losing sight of the people carrying it.	☐

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Understanding Your Responses

Do not begin with your lowest score. Start with the area that appears strongest and consider how that strength has served the people around you. Then look for a weaker area that could work against that strength if left unattended.

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You do not need to become exceptional in every area. A weaker area simply needs to become dependable enough that it does not undermine trust or keep your strengths from bearing fruit.

A section total can sometimes hide an important concern. Pause over any statement you rated 1 or 2, especially when it concerns honesty, safety, dignity, personal conduct, or the use of authority.

Self-assessment also has limits. Consider asking someone who knows you well to complete the reflection separately and then compare your responses. The purpose is not to argue over a number, but to listen for what that person's experience may teach you.

A Place to Begin

1. Which of these three areas appears strongest in me, and where have I seen it make a difference?

2. How could I use that strength more intentionally for the good of others?

3. Which weaker area most needs attention so it does not work against what is strong?

4. What one step will I take, and who can help me follow through?

For Further Reflection

Return to *A Biblical Picture of a Shepherd Leader* at the beginning of this resource. Choose one quality that draws your attention, read the Scripture beside it, and consider what God may be inviting you to strengthen.

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Companion Resources

> *Lighthouse Leadership* explores ten qualities people need from someone they have trusted to lead, especially when circumstances are difficult and the way forward is not yet clear.

> *Helping People Grow* looks more closely at encouragement, correction, honest feedback, and helping another person develop.

> *Practical Guidelines for Getting Things Done* offers a practical way to turn a decision or shared direction into clear action and follow it through.

Acknowledgments and Further Reading

This resource is rooted first in Scripture. My thinking has also been shaped by leaders and writers who helped me understand more clearly what it means to care for people and carry responsibility well. The three-part Shepherd's Way framework and its accompanying reflection are my own synthesis.

The books below have been especially helpful to me and offer a place to explore these ideas further.

- Blackaby, Henry T., and Richard Blackaby. Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda. Revised and expanded edition.
- Cook, Terry. Lead, Develop, Care: Shaping a Different Kind of Leader.
- Greenleaf, Robert K. The Servant as Leader.
- Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine and The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today.
- Johnson, Bill. Hosting the Presence and Strengthen Yourself in the Lord.
- Maxwell, John C. The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, The 5 Levels of Leadership, and The Leader's Greatest Return.

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