

Preparing for Godly Advancement

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

This paper grew out of a talk Paul Stanley and I gave several years ago to a group of Navigator leaders. It was one of the many things we were able to do together over the long years of our friendship. Paul was also a mentor to me for nearly twenty years, so his influence is woven through many of the lessons that follow.

We began that presentation with a question:

What do you wish you had known as you advanced in leadership?

It is a good question. Many of these lessons are learned after we need them. We are given a larger responsibility, step into it with the best understanding we have, and then discover that what worked before may no longer be enough. Some of what follows came through success. Much of it grew out of mistakes and experiences I had to think about for a long time before I understood what they were trying to teach me.

When I speak of advancement, I do not mean simply acquiring a larger title. Advancement occurs whenever our influence grows and more people are affected by our decisions. Sometimes that includes a new position. At other times, people begin to trust our judgment or invite us to serve in a wider way.

For those who share my faith, advancement also carries a deeper question: Am I becoming someone God can trust with greater influence?

Psalms 75 says that promotion comes neither from the east nor the west nor the south. God is the one who brings one person down and raises another. I have found that perspective freeing. It does not make us passive. We should work hard and prepare ourselves for whatever may come. But we do not have to grasp for a position or force open a door. Promotion ultimately comes from the Lord.

Elisha offers a helpful picture of that posture. He did not remain behind when Elijah invited him to stop along the way. He kept following until the mantle passed to him. Elisha was not chasing a title, but neither was he willing to settle short of what God had asked him to pursue.

Looking back over more than forty years of leadership, seven lessons stand out.

1. As Responsibility Increases, Competence Demands More Leadership Software Than Leadership Hardware

Early in my career, I thought of competence much more in terms of hardware than software.

I was trained as an engineer. I was comfortable with calculations and detailed plans. I liked problems that could be studied until a reasonable answer emerged. In that world, competence could usually be seen in whether you understood the work and produced dependable results.

Those abilities served me well and opened doors to larger assignments. Without realizing it, however, I began to assume that the answer to each new responsibility was simply more technical knowledge and harder work.

I eventually came to think of technical knowledge, processes, measurements, and professional skill as leadership hardware. Leadership software was harder to see. It included listening, clear communication, trust, and the judgment needed when the answer was uncertain.

As my responsibilities grew, the nature of the work changed. I could no longer know as much about every subject as the people who reported to me. More of the work had to be accomplished through others, and the most difficult problems rarely arrived with a clean technical solution. Often, several legitimate needs were in tension, or trust had already been damaged before the issue reached me.

Leadership hardware never became unimportant. The balance simply changed. The higher I went, the more the work depended upon the quality of my leadership software.

I wish I had begun developing that part of my leadership much earlier. A new position can be given to us in a day. The judgment and ability to work well with people usually take years to develop.

2. When Moving Into Positions of Increasing Responsibility, Learn the Lesson of the Serpent

One of the most painful lessons of my career came at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

I had been asked to lead a struggling department of approximately thirty drafters and design technicians. The work needed greater consistency and clearer standards, so I led in a fairly hands-on way. Over the next several years, the department became one of the most effective organizations at the laboratory. At one point, it was called the “shining star” of Los Alamos National Laboratory.

That success led to a promotion. I was asked to lead a very different organization made up of approximately sixty highly educated technical professionals, many with advanced degrees.

I entered the new assignment believing that the approach that had worked so well with the first group would work again. I began putting expectations in place almost immediately and led in the same hands-on manner.

It did not go well.

Frustration grew. Complaints were filed, and formal investigations were conducted into my leadership. For a time, I was not sure I would keep my job.

My supervisor supported me, but I still had to face what had happened. I had mistaken an approach that worked in one setting for the way leadership should work in every setting. I entered the new organization with too many assumptions and had not taken enough time to understand the people or the work they were doing.

That experience helped me understand what I have come to call the lesson of the serpent.

Snakes do not all behave in the same way, but a snake in unfamiliar surroundings will often remain inconspicuous. It relies upon concealment and its senses to take in what is around it. It becomes aware of where it can move safely and what may pose a threat. It does not expose itself unnecessarily or strike simply to announce that it has arrived.

When Jesus told his disciples to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, he was certainly not encouraging them to become deceptive. I believe he was telling them to be discerning. They were to pay attention to the setting they were entering and understand what was around them.

That became an important leadership lesson for me. Entering a new responsibility is not the time to demonstrate our value by changing everything in sight. It is a time to listen and understand what has already been built before deciding what needs to change.

When I was later promoted to lead a Utilities organization of approximately two hundred people, I approached the assignment very differently. During my first two weeks, I met individually with thirty-five leaders. I asked what they believed was working and where the organization needed to change. We also talked about the challenges they were facing and the opportunities we might be missing. I listened and took careful notes before making significant changes.

Experience teaches us only when we are willing to examine it honestly, acknowledge our part in what happened, and allow what we have learned to influence what we do next.

3. Your Signature Strengths Will Most Likely Be Your Lifelong Area of Greatest Contribution, but the Way You Leverage Them Must Adapt

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

One of my signature strengths has always been a bias toward action. In the language of the StrengthsFinder assessment, I am an Activator. I enjoy getting things moving. Once I have 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 strength 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 strength could work against me. I might be ready to act, but the people around me had not necessarily had the same time or information to understand the situation. They sometimes needed more context or better 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 stop being an Activator. That strength was part of how God had made me and continued to be one of my greatest contributions. I needed to learn how to use it in a way that helped other people succeed.

Our strengths do not always arrive in mature form. Advancement places greater weight on 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 must adapt to serve people well as our influence expands.

4. Senior Leaders Must Embrace Accountability for the Entire Enterprise, Not Just Their Area of Responsibility

A different shift took place as I moved into senior leadership at Colorado Springs Utilities.

When I led a department, it was natural to feel a particular responsibility for the people in that group. I wanted them to have the resources they needed and receive appropriate recognition for their work. I also wanted to protect them from decisions that might make their jobs more difficult.

That loyalty was not wrong, but it was no longer sufficient as my responsibility grew.

Colorado Springs Utilities provided electric, natural gas, water, and wastewater services to an entire community. Decisions made in one part of the organization could affect nearly two thousand employees and more than half a million people who depended upon us.

At the senior leadership table, I could no longer enter every conversation primarily as an advocate for my own area. I had to consider what was best for the whole organization. At times, that meant allowing another area's need to take priority or supporting a decision that was less convenient for the people closest to me.

I never stopped caring about my own group. The circle of people for whom I felt responsible simply had to grow.

That is one of the most important changes a senior leader must make. We may delegate responsibility for a particular piece of work, but we cannot step away from our accountability for the whole. The larger mission must eventually carry more weight than the interests of the part we know best.

5. Master the Art of Asking Questions. Pull the String Often.

Paul Stanley taught me a great deal about the value of a good question.

I would sometimes come to him with a complicated leadership problem, hoping he would tell me what to do. Paul usually had enough experience to give me an answer, but he often chose not to begin there. Instead, he would ask what I thought was happening. If my response rested on an assumption, he would ask another question and gently pull the string a little farther.

Sometimes I left without Paul having given me a direct answer, yet with a much clearer understanding of what I needed to do.

It took me a while to recognize what he was giving me. He was not merely helping me solve the problem in front of me. He was helping me develop judgment. He wanted me to become capable of working through difficult situations long after our conversation had ended.

Jesus also used questions this way. His questions often brought people face-to-face with what they believed and what they would do next.

Good questions can uncover what has been hiding in plain sight. They also communicate respect. They leave room for the possibility that the person in front of us sees something we have missed.

Pulling the string does not mean interrogating people or refusing to make a decision. It means remaining curious when something does not quite make sense. It means asking another thoughtful question when an answer seems incomplete and listening long enough to understand what is really being said.

I have rarely regretted asking another sincere question. More than once, I have wished I had waited before reaching a conclusion.

6. Personally Steward the Quality of the Relationships Between Your Direct Reports and Their Direct Reports

Another lesson took longer for me to see.

A leader who reported to me could be dependable and easy to work with while creating a very different experience for the people below. If I judged that person only by what I experienced firsthand, I could easily miss what others were carrying.

One of the ways I tried to stay close to those relationships was by asking my direct reports about the people who reported to them:

What do you see as this person's greatest strength?

What challenges are you facing with him or her right now?

What assignments have you given this person to stretch and develop them?

I was not looking for polished answers. I was listening for evidence that my direct report really knew the person. I wanted to know whether they understood what brought that individual energy and where help was needed. I also listened for evidence that they were providing meaningful opportunities to grow.

What I was really trying to understand was the quality of the relationship at that level. If leaders knew their people and were helping them develop, that kind of care could continue to cascade through the organization. If the relationship was distant or merely transactional, the way that leader operated could leave a serious wake.

As my responsibilities grew, I learned to pay attention not only to what a leader accomplished but to how those results were being achieved. This did not mean bypassing leaders or creating ways for

people to work around them. It meant staying close enough to recognize patterns and being willing to ask about what I was seeing.

I also had to guard against what I would call false compassion. There were times when I was tempted to delay a difficult conversation because I did not want to discourage someone.. But avoiding the conversation usually did not help that person, and it could leave others living under the consequences.

The apostle Paul cared deeply about people, yet he was willing to confront Peter when Peter's conduct was harming others. Genuine care does not avoid every uncomfortable conversation. Sometimes the kindest thing we can do is speak honestly while there is still time for something to change.

7. Stay Little in Your Own Eyes

The last lesson may be the most important because it lies beneath all the others.

Over the years, I have watched more than one person receive greater authority and gradually become someone different. A person who had once been approachable became controlling. Someone who had worked easily beside others began to treat questions as challenges to his authority.

I cannot know everything that was happening within those individuals. But their experiences reminded me that a position does not necessarily create what later appears. Often, it enlarges something that was already there.

Samuel once reminded Saul of the time when he had been "little" in his own eyes and God made him king. As Saul's position grew, so did his concern for maintaining the approval of others. He eventually admitted that he had disobeyed because he was afraid of the people and gave in to them.

David faced rejection from almost every direction. His father initially left him in the fields when Samuel came to anoint one of his sons. Saul hurled a spear at him, and at Ziklag David's own men talked about

stoning him. Yet David did not allow rejection to determine his destiny. He strengthened himself in the Lord and continued to seek God's direction.

Years later, David failed in a different kind of test. In a season of comfort and authority, he gave way to his desire for Bathsheba. His failure did not erase God's purposes for his life, but it brought great grief into his family and nation.

A person can survive years of opposition and still stumble when life becomes comfortable.

Advancement does not remove the places within us that need attention. It gives them greater reach. The need for significance, wounds from rejection, fear of what others think, ungoverned desire, and pride can all become openings through which our leadership begins to drift. Scripture describes some of these as the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life.

Jesus showed us another way. He refused to build his life around appetite, recognition, or power. He said that he did what he saw his Father doing and spoke what the Father gave him to say. Because his identity was settled, he did not need the crowd's approval in order to remain faithful.

Staying little in our own eyes does not mean diminishing our gifts or pretending we have nothing to contribute. It means remembering where those gifts came from and why they were given. It means remaining teachable and keeping people near us who are willing to tell us the truth.

The Advancement That Matters Most

These seven lessons are not a formula for receiving a promotion. They are ways of preparing ourselves to carry influence without allowing that influence to carry us somewhere we never intended to go.

Ultimately, godly advancement is becoming someone God can count on—someone willing to follow his direction and accomplish the purposes placed in his hands.

Looking back, I no longer measure advancement primarily by the positions a person has held. I am more interested in what happened in the lives of the people entrusted to that leader.

I once expressed 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

- If my responsibility increased tomorrow, what part of my leadership capacity would be placed under the greatest strain?
- Where might I be relying on an approach that worked in the past without fully understanding the people and circumstances in front of me now?
- How does one of my greatest strengths need to mature so it continues to serve others well?
- What do the experiences of the people beneath my direct reports tell me about the leadership climate I am helping create?
- Is there an unresolved need, fear, wound, or desire that greater authority might enlarge if I leave it unattended?

Companion Papers for Going Deeper

The following papers on JerryForte.com explore several of these themes more fully:

- [Recognizing God’s Fingerprints in Your Story: Harvesting Wisdom from the Experiences That Have Shaped You](#) offers a way to reflect on the experiences that have formed us and carry their lessons into what comes next.
- [Coaching with the Questions of Jesus: An Invitation into Clarity, Discernment, and Wholehearted Response](#) develops the practice of using thoughtful questions to help people see more clearly and take greater ownership.

- Investing Your Life in Others and The Shepherd's Way go further into developing people and cultivating relationships that allow healthy leadership to take root throughout an organization.
- Finishing Well considers the hidden vulnerabilities that can grow under the weight of responsibility and the practices that help us remain faithful over a lifetime.

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