

Lead Yourself First

The Lost Art of Self Leadership

By Dan Webster

By the fall of 1989 I had arrived. Everything on the surface of my life glittered. If you were in the world of student ministry, chances are you had heard of me and may even have wished that you had my job. In my chosen vocational field, I was at the top of my game. Back then I was the Executive Director of Student Ministries at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, one of the most influential churches in the world.

The ministry I directed involved over 1500 high school students, an Internship Program that was producing professional Christian leaders, a volunteer leadership team made up of over two hundred wonderfully capable people, seven super star associate staff, and opportunities to speak were coming in every week. If you were a professional youth worker, I was someone to envy. On the surface, it looked as if I were living my dream.

Life Is Not Always What It Seems

We both know that things are often not as they appear. On a cold Christmas morning in 1989 the darkness of my inner world enveloped me. At 3 a.m. I found myself sitting restlessly by my Christmas tree admitting that I felt as if I were dying inside. While working at the largest church in America, my heart had somehow shrunk to the size of a pea. How strange things seemed...I was in the middle of fabulous vocational success and yet I was losing the energy and passion to work with students. I was putting strong wings on the weary hearts of kids while my own heart was wasting away.

Have you ever experienced a time like that? A time when all the externals of life are contaminated by inner discontent and frustration? It can happen...it happens all the time to good people like you and me.

Two realities of leadership – above and beneath the waterline

Over the years I've come to understand that leadership has two dynamic dimensions to it. The *first* has to do with the skills, strategy, methods side of leadership. The *other* has to do with the heart or character of the leader. I like to think of these two aspects of leadership by picturing a sailboat in my mind. If you look at a sailboat sitting in the water you can see everything *above the waterline* - the mast, sail, deck and riggings. I consider this the external part of a leader's life (that which is above the waterline). What you can't see as you look at the sailboat is the most important part of the boat...the keel and ballast that are *beneath the waterline*. This is the internal part of a leader's life...not seeable, but most important. In sailing there is one principle that cannot be

violated...you must have more weight beneath the waterline than above the waterline if you want to sail safely. In leadership you can take this truth to the bank...a leader must develop more weight beneath the waterline of his or her life or there will be trouble up the road.

This metaphor of a sailboat gives an accurate picture of any leader's life. We both know that to be effective a leader must have well developed skills above the waterline. But to be a lasting leader – a leader of real impact - we must also have a developing and mature character beneath the waterline.

The 50% factor that's often ignored

Dee Hock, in an excellent article in *LEADER TO LEADER* (number 15/winter 2000, www.pfdf.org) entitled *The Art of Chaordic Leadership*, mentions that when people talk about the responsibilities of leadership they almost always begin by thinking of the people under them, those they lead. He believes this is a fatal error. From many years of successful leadership he states, "*The first and paramount responsibility of anyone who purports to manage is to manage self: one's own integrity, character, ethics, knowledge, wisdom, temperament, words and acts.*" Dee Hock goes on to suggest that a leader should spend 50% of his or her time managing his or herself so that they bring a full heart into their leadership responsibilities. That sure seems like a large percentage of time, but my experience proves that he's right. I've found that leadership isn't much fun if I lose my zeal, passion, joy and direction. I've learned the hard way that I can't ask anyone to insure zeal, passion, joy and direction are present in my life -- they are my responsibility and the result of *me* managing my life well.

Leadership Begins Beneath the Waterline

I'd like to suggest that leadership begins beneath the waterline of life. I believe that the condition of our inner worlds makes a difference in life. We must remember that we bring ourselves - our heart and attitudes - into every relationship, responsibility, temptation and opportunity. And the condition of our hearts has everything to do with the type of decisions and impact we make.

My dismal life condition in 1989 can, to a large degree, be attributed to spending too much time managing those under my care and very little managing my heart. Maybe you find that true of you today. Way too many leaders have hearts that are in trouble even though they continue to show up and fulfill their leadership responsibilities.

Leaders whose hearts are in trouble show it in various ways. Nancy Beach is a close friend and the director of programming at Willow Creek Community Church. She suggests the following are signs of a heart, an inner world, that is trouble.

- 1- A heart in trouble has **flat-lined**...it can't feel deep emotion any more. Healthy hearts can feel the spectrum of emotion such as love, sadness, joy, excitement, anger and empathy. Hearts in trouble can't celebrate even when life is wonderful. This was exactly my experience in the fall of '89.
- 2- A heart in trouble **no longer engages in the moment or celebrates the good things of life**. Healthy hearts have the ability to seize the day and be with people in the moment. In 1989 I didn't want to be with people and, strange as it sounds, I sure wasn't able to celebrate the miracle I was in the middle of leading.
- 3- A heart in trouble **no longer has room for fun, laughter or spontaneity**. Healthy hearts don't take life so seriously that they miss the fun of life. In 1989 everything was work to me, I couldn't even spell the word *fun*.
- 4- A heart in trouble has **lost compassion for those hurting**. Healthy hearts don't look at people in need as intrusions but are able to extend love and concern. In '89 I could care less for kids, they were a burden.
- 5- A heart in trouble has **lost the capacity to hear God's voice and respond**. Healthy hearts are soft, attentive and open to the gentle prompting of God.

(to get a copy of Nancy's message HEART CHECK FOR THE CHRISTIAN ARTIST, go to www.willowcreek.org. It can be found under the ARTS Conference 2000.)

When we mismanage our lives our hearts dry up and turn cold to both people and God. We no longer live life; we endure life or only look forward to life destroying fun fixes on weekends. Those who survive and thrive in life learn what it means to renew their hearts so that they bring a fresh self into their work and relationships. How do we bring leadership to our hearts?

Leadership of the HEART

Here are a few tips for leading your heart:

*First, **be honest***. If you read the list above and those five points describe your heart today...admit it. Admit it to yourself and your spouse or close friend. Jesus told us that truth has the power to set us free. What is the truth when it comes to your heart? How is your heart?

*Second, **own your life***. Don't expect anyone to rescue you. When I was a mess I wanted someone to notice and take me by the hand and help me. Forget it, life isn't like that. No one is going to 'save' you. You must take responsibility for your life. Don't blame others for your situation. Stop playing the victim role. Grow up and move towards doing that which will breathe life back into you. I know that this is risky, but it must be done. Are you waiting for someone to rescue you?

*Third, **create a plan.*** The plan I created to get myself back together had many aspects to it. I asked for some time off. Fortunately, I had a three month sabbatical coming. Maybe you need to take a few vacation days to sort out where you are and what you can do to get back on track. A day to really think about your life and any changes you might need to make is well worth it. Do you have a plan and when will you create one?

*Forth, **deal with your 'stuff.'*** During my time off I also decided to go to a Christian counselor and discuss my family of origin. I knew I had 'stuff' from my past that was contaminating my present. I had to courageously go after my inner health. That experience was difficult but boy was it worth it. Do you need to talk with anyone to help you sort out where you are and create a plan for your future? Who?

*Fifth, **rediscover play.*** I also attempted to rediscover play. Doing people work can steal your life. It often seems that the needs of people never end. I realized that I had stopped playing racquetball and fishing during the dog days of '89. I needed to rediscover legitimate fun fixes that renewed my soul. If we don't get enough legitimate fun fixes we will be tempted to pursue illegitimate fun fixes that can lead to further trouble. What can you do this week that will renew you and be fun?

*Sixth, **reestablish quiet times with God.*** Modern culture can dismember our inner worlds if we allow it to. Slowing down and praying allows us to remember that we are loved by God and the objects of His care. You might want to begin by reading one Psalm and one Proverb a day. When will you get alone and quiet before God in the next 24 hours?

For me the most challenging thing in life is to manage my life so that I live with a healthy and well led heart. It took me three years to completely recover from my midlife exhaustion and confusion. I doubt if it will take you that long. Hopefully you need only make a few minor adjustments to your schedule to insure that you are leading your heart well. Please get after this task...your spouse, boss, friends, children and the kids you are called to love will all benefit.

Something to think about:

Take a couple minutes and reflect on the questions I listed under the six ideas for leading your heart. I'll write them again here...

- 1- What is your heart condition today, how are you really? Any signs of trouble?

- 2- Are you waiting for someone to rescue you from your present condition or are you 'owning' your life and moving toward leading your heart well?

- 3- Do you have a plan for leading your heart? When will you make one?

- 4- Do you need to talk with anyone to help you sort out where you are and create a plan for your future? Who might help?

- 5- What can you do this week that will renew you and be fun?

- 6- When will you get alone and quiet before God in the next 24 hours?

One last suggestion...

Read Psalm 46 and consider what you can learn about King David's heart and what he did to renew himself.