



Leaders

BOOK SUMMARIES

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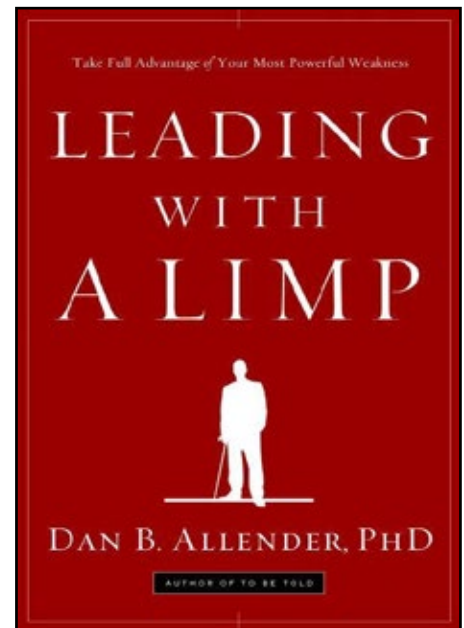
Leading With A Limp

Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness

THE SUMMARY

There are two key assumptions that guide what you are about to read. The first is a hard truth: *if you're a leader, you're in the battle of your life*. Nothing comes easily, and if you've already tried the "easy" solutions, you have found they come up empty. Leadership will stretch you and bring you to the end of yourself. Only facing this truth will give you the ability to lead with inner confidence.

The second assumption is this: *to the degree you face and name and deal with your failures as a leader, to that same extent you will create an environment conducive to growing and retaining productive and committed colleagues*. The leader's character is what makes the difference in an organization. Confession doesn't lead to disrespect; it actually transforms the leader's character and earns her greater respect and power. It's a strange paradox—to the degree that you attempt to hide your weaknesses, the more you will need to control those you lead, the more insecure you will become, and the more rigidity you will impose—which will lead to the departure of



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your best people.

Given how powerful it is when leaders name their own failures, why is it so rare? Three primary reasons come immediately to mind:

- *Fear*. A leader who is really open about his failures risks losing the confidence of his staff, or his board could fire him, or clients could leave, etc. The truth is we gain people's trust, but facing our fears involves risk.
- *Narcissism*. We are often too married to our image to really come clean about how messed up we are.
- *Addiction*. A struggling leader can easily isolate himself and fill his loneliness with the cancer of addictive substances or behaviors, ranging from sex to alcohol to workaholism.

It is possible to take a different path. As an act of leadership, consider the risk of giving up your life through facing, naming, and bearing your weaknesses, and imagine the paradoxical yet promised benefits.

Chapter 1: A Leadership Confession—Flight is the Only Sane Response

Leaders are dangerous. They can hurt people, aren't always logical, and can have mixed motives. Everything I have despised in other leaders I have replicated in our organization. Many times I've acted too quickly before gathering sufficient data. Other times I've failed to act at all. And as

I go on, the question lingers: what am I doing wrong?

When you are a leader, you face problems all the time. Each response to a problem often creates new problems. The decisions involved are never really simple. A good leader will, in time, disappoint everyone. Leadership requires a willingness to not be liked. But it's impossible to lead people who doubt you or hate you. So the constant tug is to make the decision that is the least offensive to the greatest number of people—which is seldom the best decision in any circumstance.

The only sane response to these realities is to not want to lead. Reluctance marks many of God's leaders in the Bible (Moses, Jonah, etc.). God tracked them down, but their first instinct was often to run.

I suggest a ridiculous approach to selecting leaders. We should bless men and women who have done their level best to escape leadership but who have been compelled to return and put their hand to the plow. And we should expect anyone who remains in a formal leadership context to experience repeated bouts of flight, doubt, surrender, and return. Why does God seem to love this kind of leader? One reason is that they are not easily seduced by power, pride, or ambition.

Power is essential to leadership; a leader uses power to make things happen. A reluctant leader is highly suspicious of people who work to accumulate and hoard power. Reluctant leaders don't aspire to hold power; they work to give it away.

A reluctant leader isn't likely to be caught

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in *pride's* limelight. Pride pushes leaders to remind others of who they know, what they've read and written, degrees earned, etc. Proud leaders think they are seldom wrong. A reluctant leader, on the other hand, knows how ridiculous it is that God has called them to lead, because they know how often they have failed and fallen short.

The *ambitious* leader pushes relentlessly to do more, get bigger, etc. (Note: the issue of ambition is not a matter of size). The mark of ambition is the zeal for bigger, better, and more—no matter the cost to people or the process. The reluctant leader is more interested in seeing people develop, and even surpass him.

This is the hard truth of reluctant leadership. It's a calling that is ridiculous, and the only sane response is to run as fast as you can in the opposite direction. But if God captures you, stop running, count the cost, and lead. It's God's design to use reluctant leaders to usher in his glory.

Chapter 2: Who is a Leader? Why it's Necessary to Count the Cost

A leader is anyone who has someone following him. If anyone looks to you for wisdom, counsel, or direction, you are a leader. But we tend to think of leaders as those who occupy formal positions that influence the shape and direction of a church or organization.

We have strong desires, or expectations, for those leaders. We want them to be a

professional, an expert—someone we can look up to, but also be similar enough to be able to relate to us. We also expect leaders to be physically attractive, good public speakers, wise, able to make tough decisions, etc. Given that, who in his right mind would want to be a leader?

Yet God calls all of us to lead—to be someone who influences others. And if that is true, we need to embrace our calling and lead. So why are we so reluctant to lead? Why do so many leaders quit? Every leader must count the cost of leadership, and the cost includes six realities every leader will face: crisis, complexity, betrayal, loneliness, weariness, and glory. No one escapes these. Let's take a closer look at each.

Crisis. Crisis is the eruption of chaos, and serves to remind us that we are fundamentally not in control. Crisis is a context for opportunity and growth, but also takes us to the edge where some don't survive.

Complexity. All leaders must deal with competing values, demands, and perspectives. Whether in crisis or in other decisions, we face a vortex of competing possibilities. Yet leaders must make decisions--and often the decisions we make set into motion the next crisis.

Betrayal. If you lead, you will eventually serve with Judas. The fact that it is inevitable often makes the experience of it even more bitter. Even when there is forgiveness and reconciliation, the initial wound feels the same, and the scar remains. Betrayal always brings a distortion of the truth. The betrayer twists

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the truth to gain power or influence, and part of the helplessness experienced by the victim is the inability to set the record straight. Any effort to do so looks defensive; any failure to mount a defense looks weak. It's a terrible bind. Betrayal actually lies at the root of many leadership crises.

Loneliness. Leadership makes having friends perilous. Few friendships can endure one person having more power than the other. Studies show that the higher you are on an organizational chart, the fewer are your friendships. Note: leadership loneliness is far more than being alone. Being a leader changes how you engage in family relationships and friendships. Loneliness comes when a leader must absorb the inevitable expressions of disappointment from others when their legitimate expectations aren't fulfilled. The leader bears the loneliness as well as the guilt that comes from knowing others' disappointment

Weariness. Few leaders, no matter what margins they build into their lives, can glide through their labor unaffected. The physical body suffers in leadership (look at pictures of US. Presidents after being in office several years). But weariness goes even deeper. Dealing with the struggles of life, our own and others, puts a ton of stress on our capacity to hope. Weariness is really about this core struggle to hope despite the circumstances and our limitations, more so than about stress and being

tired.

Glory. One of the greatest struggles for leaders is what to do with glory. Every leader who has fought for their team will experience moments of glory. However, often after those moments God leads us to engage a difficulty that is impossible to handle at our current level of maturity...which both keeps us humble and forces us to grow.

Chapter 3: A Case Study in Successful Failed Leadership

In the story of Jacob and Esau, found in Genesis 25-35, we find some important principles related to leading with a limp. Prior to his encounter with God in Genesis 32, where Jacob gets both a new name and a limp, scheming and deceit marked his life. That deceit brought division into his family, and caused his brother to hate him. But an encounter with God changed him. The passage that describes Jacob's struggle with God indicates this is a fight to the bone; it's a life-and-death struggle, one that permanently marks Jacob.

The process of becoming a person who can lead others with a limp is not what we would predict. It often involves us becoming desperate and exposes our own narcissism, our fears, dogmatism, and tendency to hide. No matter how far off the mark we might be, the story of Jacob shows us the goodness of God as he blesses a conniving, undeserving man. And we see that if we open ourselves to an encounter with God, we will not come out

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of it unchanged.

Chapter 4: It's Failing That Matters—Nothing Succeeds like Imperfection

God loves reluctant leaders, especially reluctant leaders who know they are frightened, confused, and broken. He seems to have a special fondness for rebels and fools. Does God choose troubled leaders because few others are foolish enough to say yes, or does he choose weak, troubled people because they serve a unique purpose in their broken state? The answer is yes.

Leaders are primarily storytellers and storymakers. Troubled leaders live with their weakness on their sleeve, and it is through their weakness that grace becomes magnified. God's leaders are intended to call his people to repentance and faith. And what better way for God to do so than to first transform the leaders, the people who need grace even more than those who follow them? Telling those stories of transformation opens the door for others to walk through.

The apostle Paul referred to himself as the "worst of sinners" (after earlier giving a list of sinners that included slave traders and mother- and father-killers). In so doing, Paul eliminated the possibility of any leader's serving with even a hint of self-righteousness.

Yet most leaders live in fear that they will one day be discovered, exposed, and even humiliated. They *know* they're a mess, but

they hope against hope that no one else will notice. Paul calls leaders to go beyond being self-effacing to being desperate and honest. It isn't enough to just be self-revealing and authentic. Our calling goes beyond that, to being reluctant, limping, chief-sinner leaders, and in so doing, to be stories. A leader is both a hero and a fool, and saint and a felon. To pretend otherwise is to be dishonest. The leader who fails to face his darkness must live with fear and hypocrisy. The result will be a defensiveness that places saving face and controlling others as higher goods than blessing others and doing good work.

Most leaders had no intention to lead; instead, they were thrown into the mess by being discontent. If they had been content with the status quo, they would never have become leaders. Leaders see the present as incomplete and inadequate and are willing to risk the comfort of the present for the promise of a better tomorrow.

A leader must simultaneously deepen the organization's desire to move while exposing the cowardice and complacency involved in its wanting to remain stationary. No wonder leading is full of risk and failure! And no wonder leadership requires a person who can both own his fear of moving forward into uncertainty and his inability to remain safe in the sure present. Navigating that terrain will always include some failure, so the leader needs to serve his people by being the first to confess his own anger, self-absorption, and cowardice and by being the first who needs to be forgiven.

Chapter 5: Facing Crisis—The Other Shoe Weighs a Ton

The English word *crisis* comes from the Greek *krisis*, which means “to sift or separate.” Crises stir things up and divide the wheat from the chaff. As dividing moments, they force leaders to make a choice—to risk and suffer with courage, or crumble under the weight of fear. Crises have a way of exposing our perceived or actual incompetence, and that brings with it a fear of being found out. We all feel to some degree like a poseur; we know that we don’t know what others presume we know. We simply are not as wise, courageous, or gifted as others often think.

Crises generate a need to gain control of the situation. As the threat becomes more severe, we clamor for resolution. We expect the true leader to subdue the danger with cool, calculated strength. We all want a leader who will take charge and make the crisis go away. The temptation for a leader in crisis is to become controlling. A controlling leader will attempt to silence others and avoid personal blame by shaming others, or simply by only hiring “yes men.”

What drives a controlling leader? Inevitably it is fear and the pursuit of power. The goal of control is to eliminate chaos and uncertainty, but underneath all efforts to control is a reservoir of fear.

No one is humble by nature. If a person is not tempted to control, especially in a crisis, this is often a symptom of despair and fatalism. Humility comes from humiliation, not from the choice to be self-

effacing or a strong urge to give others the credit. Humility that has not come from suffering due to one’s own arrogance is either a pragmatic strategy to get along with others or a natural bent that seems to benefit only a few rare individuals. For most leaders, humility comes only by wounds suffered from foolish falls.

This is the terrible secret about leadership and life: we achieve brokenness by falling off our throne. It’s not a choice—I don’t know anyone who has made the decision to be broken and achieved it as an act of the will. But to experience brokenness and humiliation, all you have to do is lead.

Leading others gives you the opportunity to first be caught in the crossfire of competing goals and agendas and then to deal with that crossfire with limited resources and inadequate information. Every decision you make will be favored by some and opposed by others, and some will certainly consider you a failure. Leading invites humiliation and brokenness.

There are only three possible responses to the absurdity of leadership: control, flight, or brokenness. Given the futility of control and the uselessness of flight, the only viable option for leaders who want to mature is to embrace being broken. We take a step toward being broken when we embrace the truth about ourselves. To be broken embraces four realities:

- I am never sufficiently good, wise, or gifted to make things work.
- My failures will harm others, the process, and myself, no matter how hard I try to avoid failure.

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- The greatest harm I can do is to try to limit the damage I cause by not participating, by quitting, or by pushing for control.
- Calling out for help from God and others is the deepest confession of humility.

To be humiliated—that is, to publicly fall off our throne of power—is to stand face to face with the deepest and truest reality of life: We were never meant to have God’s power. We are not God.

A leader who has been broken is a paradox of confidence and openness. If confidence is only the assurance that we are right, then confidence is nothing more than well-groomed arrogance. True confidence is courage that has been humbled. A limping leader’s confidence looks like this: *I don’t know if I am right, nor am I sure the path chosen is the best, but after reflection, feedback, debate, and prayer, I am choosing this path.* That leader isn’t trying to prove anything. If those I lead already know the worst about me—that I am a sinner—I have the freedom to not be afraid, to ask questions, to identify and remove the logs in my own eyes that would inhibit me from having clear vision and good wisdom.

Chapter 6: The Problem of Complexity—All Leaders See Through a Glass Darkly

One of the challenges every leader faces today relates to the complexity of the world we live in. At no time in history has more information been available to us, and

most of it is useless. How can I even know which of all the sites on a particular topic can be trusted to be accurate?

More than the complexity that comes with information overload is the complexity that is the result of sin. The heart is said to be too convoluted to know. We don’t fully understand our own motivations, let alone the heart of another. Perfect clarity isn’t going to happen this side of eternity.

As an aside, sometimes leaders allow apparent complexity to obscure what is a simple, but difficult, decision. Often in therapy I hear clients say “I don’t know” when they really mean “I don’t want to know.” Leaders often feel that the difficulty of the matter lets them off the hook and gives them permission not to know, and therefore, not to act.

Beyond the simple decisions that we often put off or avoid are the truly complex circumstances that arise in any organization. A situation or decision becomes complex any time that past, present, and future collide. The lens I use to “see” in the present was formed in the past. For example, a middle-aged man getting on an elevator doesn’t see the same thing that a young woman sees when she gets on it a floor later. He may barely notice her; she invariably will, and will find a space that feels the safest from prying eyes or groping hands. He won’t even think about safety; she thinks about nothing but.

The really big issue that underlies complexity is this: we hate ambiguity. Data that contradicts how we have been viewing a problem annoys us. We hate ambiguity because we hate feeling out of control. If

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we knew with certainty that what we were doing is “right” we could relax and proceed with confidence. But when the past fails to offer us a sure guide, and the present information is incomplete, then the future feels up for grabs. It’s often in this moment that we gravitate to rigidity, to a narrowing of options that pretends to simplify things. We desperately want to believe the empty promise of certainty.

One (unhelpful) way to respond to complexity is by embracing a dogmatic stance. Dogmatism assures us that we know the answer before we bother to look. On the surface, this approach seems to make life simpler, but it almost always steers us in the wrong direction. Dogmatism isn’t really about what we believe but how we hold those beliefs. We become rigid, refusing to consider multiple options. Wherever you see polarities—good/bad, right/wrong, left/right—you know the issue has been oversimplified. A dogmatic approach has been exercised in an attempt to avoid complexity.

If we want something better than just one “right” way, we must seek the input of people who will help us find a different path from the one we’d find on our own. That doesn’t mean not moving forward until there is a consensus (many leaders want full agreement in order to take a risk). A leader-fool also knows that chaos opens the door to a new level of listening and receiving. A leader-fool blesses complexity because he knows it will humble the team, expose their idols of control, and invite them both to listen with greater depth and to open their hearts to the inverted, paradoxical ways of God.

Chapter 7: No More Jackasses—Wrestling with Betrayal Without Becoming a Jerk

When leaders fail to deal with their woundedness, they fall into unhealthy patterns of leadership. Envy, for example, comes from a sense of inadequacy and emptiness rooted in our woundedness. The more a person is driven by those things, the more self-centered they will be. That’s why it is imperative that as leaders we “look behind the curtain.”

A leader is often a wounded individual who feels drawn to rectify, to amend, the suffering he/she has endured in the past. It sounds noble, and often is, until new wounds of betrayal are suffered that repeat the original harm. Then the nastiness begins.

A leader who hasn’t faced his wounds or acknowledged the defenses he has erected to protect from further harm, may become cruel, defensive, arrogant, or emotionally insulated—reflecting some of the characteristics we associate with *narcissism*. The more powerful the person’s leadership position, the more likely it is that the leader has narcissistic characteristics.

One of those areas of woundedness that many leaders have in their history is an experience of betrayal (which makes it ironic that the role of leader brings with it the guarantee of being betrayed). Betrayal comes primarily in one of two forms: abandonment or abuse. An absentee father creates a wound that runs deep; often the

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heart chooses to protect itself by limiting or eliminating the need for connection with others.

Abuse is an even worse form of betrayal. Be it physical, sexual, or emotional, it causes an inner rage that becomes the defense against the shame of being used and then discarded. (The wound is often hidden under a guise of fearlessness and independence). Ironically, what a typical follower wants is protection from fear and freedom from choice, and he can find these in a narcissistic leader, who doesn't mind being independent and making choices. But that easily and often backfires when those same followers turn on the leader.

The term *narcissist* is often used to describe someone who is egotistical and self-absorbed, but narcissism actually spans a continuum. In any form it involved the following four aspects:

- Lack of interest in the perspective of others.
- Highly opinionated.
- Emotionally detached.
- Ruthlessly utilitarian.

Despite these traits of narcissism, many commend it in its nonmalignant form as the basis of great leadership. But true success involves failure, brokenness, and humility, and narcissists reject this notion. Humility is too similar to humiliation, which is a reminder of the betrayal they have suffered in the past. Narcissists spend their lives avoiding further betrayal by refusing to need other people. But betrayal is inevitable; what is uncertain is how we will

embrace betrayal and use it for the growth of character.

The narcissist is committed to achieving a position of power in order to protect herself from more betrayal. But God has a habit of ruining narcissistic dreams. God simply invites a narcissist to either rage or rest. We all rage against God, but narcissists stop there. When they have exhausted their fury, they crawl off to lick their wounds and don't bother with God. A limping leader is different: he will continue on, bumping into the God who will not back away. Only repeated encounters with God can bring us the genuine rest we seek. God invites the narcissist to collapse in his arms of love, and surrender the fight.

The antidote to betrayal is developing a heart of gratitude. We can't force ourselves to be grateful, but we can stumble into the arms of gratitude when we are exhausted from the fight. Gratitude opens the heart to amazement and awe. Gratitude receives even betrayal as a gift that deepens our hunger.

Chapter 8: Escaping Solitary Confinement—The Truth That Sets a Lonely Leader Free

Most leaders know what it's like to walk into a room and notice the atmosphere suddenly change. A leader is not an ordinary person because others view him through a lens of heightened expectations and desires. No matter how hard a leader wishes to be a regular person, it just isn't possible. The moment we take on the

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mantle of leadership, other people assign us a power that can do them harm or good. All leaders are lonely, but few are lonely for good reasons. The phrase “it’s lonely at the top” is true, but there is a difference between legitimate loneliness and self-inflicted isolation.

Legitimate loneliness stems from three things:

1. No one *can* understand a leader’s reality. Leaders often have more information than those they lead. And even if leaders told others of the crises and complexities of their world, they would receive only dull, blank stares.
2. No one *wants* to understand. What often hurts is that few really want to understand us because such understanding would call them to join the world, and the pain, of the leader.
3. No one is (fully) *allowed* to understand. More than anyone else in the organization, a leader knows about matters that affect the lives of people he both cares for and relates to on a daily basis. For example, at least 70% of the leaders I surveyed had experienced the isolation that comes from having to fire an employee and not be able to tell others why. Tough decisions that can’t be explained or defended leave the leaders vulnerable and alone.

There are other reasons leaders are lonely. We hide when we are afraid; that isn’t something we can often share with others. One leader put it this way: *most of the time no one knows how lonely I can*

find myself. My silence comes from not wanting to be perceived as whiny and not wanting to be seen as weak or needy. I can be vulnerable with other areas of my life, but this one I keep to myself. I think I have become very good at disguising my insecurity.

These comments underscore a sad reality: no one can truly understand the weight leaders carry on a daily basis unless he or she is in a similar position. That means it usually isn’t possible to have friends in the same organization. Those relationships usually become more about building alliances that secure power and safety rather than real friendship.

What then does it mean to be a friend when you are also a leader, and how can you avoid the self-imposed prison of loneliness? Friendship is a result of both sharing each other’s burdens—weeping with those who weep—and sharing delights—laughing and celebrating life together. If you have someone who will weep with you, celebrate with you, and confront you honestly and tenderly about your failures, you are blessed. No longer are you alone in the isolating work of leadership.

Loneliness is never meant to be the “cross” that leaders are to suffer simply because they are leaders. A leadership team is meant to be a community of friends who suffer and delight in one another. And to the degree there is a refusal to be friends, there will be hiding, game-playing, politicizing power, and manipulating the process to achieve invulnerability.

Chapter 9: Worn to a Nub—The Exhaustion and Disillusionment That Introduce True Hope

The leader who doesn't feel pressed to the wall often is not involved in a work that is advancing sufficiently against the forces of darkness. But the burned-out leader has allowed the intensity and exhaustion of his calling to take away the pleasure of hope. Every leader needs hope, but two factors do their best to extinguish it: unlimited need and expanding opportunity.

We face unlimited needs as leaders, and that can be exhausting. Our felt need for action is commensurate to the intensity of the cry for help. The more need there is, the more action is necessary to respond to the opportunity. But the more we act, the less energy we have in reserve, and until our reserves are replenished, we can't motor forward because our fuel has been depleted. It's a simple formula. The challenge lies in the fact that need is energizing. We are drawn to the fight, but once we engage, our bodies suffer stress and exhaustion. With every step forward, we find new demands on our time. Every choice we make to move forward into what we were meant to do will inevitably lead to new needs and more opportunities. For many of us, the only solution is to get busier.

Being busy seems like the opposite of laziness, but a busy person is not so much active as lost. A lazy person does little to nothing while a busy person does almost everything. The similarity is that both refuse to be intentional. Busyness is the moral equivalent of laziness, because it

involves refusing to live with courage and intentionality.

A busy leader spins webs of activity to satisfy an inner yearning for meaning and the hungry expectations of others. Our busyness has little to do with God, but its one benefit is that it awakens us to our foolishness. Our frantic pace will at some point reveal our threadbare souls, and ideally lead us back to our First Love.

That usually happens when we become disillusioned about all our lesser loves. The sole reason to serve as a Christian is Jesus, but he is easily lost in the various activities that consume our days. The real cost of our busyness, therefore, is the loss of our spiritual vitality. Among leaders I surveyed, it was a common sentiment that crisis and pressure can energize activity, but they deplete the soul.

Freedom begins to come when we acknowledge the disillusionment that comes when the thrill of the challenge wears thin. Some of that happens when we realize that people don't "rally to the cause." Most people want nothing more demanding than some television and a few uncomplicated laughs. Facing that can be quite disillusioning. But a leader's dreams must die if a deep soul is to be born. It's the loss of all we cherish that begins to form in us a heart capable of leading others reluctantly and humbly.

The disillusioned and best leaders are those who have nothing left to prove because they have known both failure and success. Failure teaches us to not fear the contempt of others. Success teaches us to not trust the applause of others. When contempt

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and applause no longer move your heart to hide or to strive, then you are ready to ask the question “What will please you, God?”

The inverted reality of limping leadership, however, is that disillusionment does not breed fatalism, but hope. Idealism pushes leaders into every battle in an effort to right all wrongs. Over time this idealism pushes a leader to the wall, exposing and clarifying limitations. The pain of hitting the wall comes with seeing one’s idealism suffer a mortal injury. The hope that results from hitting the wall comes with the realization that disillusionment frees a leader from the demand to do more today than was done yesterday. When you admit you can’t do everything, you are then free to more fully embrace the call of God.

The beauty of a limp is that it slows you down, forcing you to take more time, and preventing you from doing as much as you’d like to do. The paradox of death leading to life requires that you disappoint many to please One.

Chapter 11: The Purpose of Limping Leadership—Forming Character, Not Running an Organization

A leader who limps has a different focus than those who define leadership as running an organization. It’s not that a limping leader doesn’t do those things, like hiring, firing, delegating, etc. But the leader’s focus is not the growth of the organization; it’s the maturing of character.

What exactly does it mean to grow in

character? Character is grown to the degree that we love God and others. Real love begins with worship of the God who graciously redeems; character, then, grows to the degree we are captured by gratitude and awe.

All of life is a gift; growth in character occurs to the degree that we accept being forgiven as a greater gift than life itself. My gratitude can grow immeasurably even as I suffer through the loss of illusions, the death of dreams, and the shattering of success. Suffering grafts our hearts with grace. (The opposite of gratitude is a sense of entitlement. Entitlement steals joy—a sense of being owed the good things in life prevents us from being delighted by the undeserved gifts we receive). A sense of gratitude sets us free to be fully ourselves.

Awe is the capacity to bow in the presence of someone (or something) more glorious than ourselves. Awe invites us to be fully part of something bigger and more glorious than ourselves, and in so doing, to give ourselves fully to serve those around us.

Growing in character, then, involves being committed to all in life that leads to gratitude and awe rather than to the things that birth presumption and control. What you think you deserve will turn you into a slave; what you think you can control will devour you. Maturity means we invite our hearts to desire what only God can offer.

Limping leaders are called to lead with character and grow the characters of those they serve. In so doing, the leader is called to go further than anyone else. If a leader wants to lead others into maturity rather than just productivity, he must go first. But

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that creates a conundrum: I must go first toward maturity, and I will inevitably fail. The standard secular response is “No one is perfect...just do your best.” That’s hollow encouragement, because my best isn’t good enough. I need to confess that I am prone to wander, be self-serving, etc. The more honest I am about what is true about myself, the less I need to hide and defend and pretend. And the freer I am to accept help from any source.

So a successful leader names his failures. Admitting failure opens the realm for discussion and a plan for improvement that addresses the harm without minimizing the injury. Acknowledging our failures opens a path for moving forward. The more I mature, the more I realize how immature I am. The older I become, the more I am amazed that anyone as screwed up as I am is allowed to be in the ministry at all.

Chapter 12: The Community of Character—No One Grows to Maturity Alone

Stories guide us in defining who we are, how we got here, where we are going, and what we must do to get there. Every organization is a culture with its own values, language, and brand, all of which are captured and communicated in its stories. In this culture, the leader is a storyteller who narrates on behalf of the community the reasons it exists.

A community of good characters must tell honest and compelling stories in order to be a transformative community.

Unfortunately, what most organizations offer instead is spin. Spin attempts to tell a flawless story, whereas the truth is always complex and gray. Spin protects us, and protects the organization, by telling part of the truth. Consider that any new development, like a building project, requires time to help people understand why it’s necessary. So they hear rousing speeches and vague plans designed to enlist support and open pocketbooks rather than honestly painting a realistic picture of the challenges, obstacles, opportunities, and uncertainties of tomorrow. A limping leader will choose truth over spin.

Growing character in community requires entering into the tension that we want the truth, yet don’t want it at the same time. Perhaps the greatest tension in ministry is that most people have not signed on to grow. Most Christians define growth as learning how to stop doing bad things, or finding new ways to avoid doing bad things. And if a person does a few good things, like going to a small group or reading their Bible, then growth is a given. Few people take growth to mean that we are literally to become like Jesus.

A pastor I know is in the middle of a building program. Before they started, he confessed to his board that while they clearly needed the space, a strong motivator to build now was the fear that some big givers would be leaving the church in a year or two. Further, he felt torn between mixed motives for building—growing attendance (a reason to build), and his own sense of success (not a reason to build). The board was stunned that he named both the goodness of building and

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his own heart issues that could mar the project. His openness prompted a whole different level of honest sharing, discussion, and prayer.

This kind of storytelling builds character. To grow character, we must not hide from the reality of our unique dignity, nor from the reality of our depravity. We are both awful and awesome at the same time. Leaders must be able to see, name, and honor both sides in all their endeavors.

Chapter 13: Telling Secrets—The Risks of Admitting You’re the Chief Sinner

If a leader publicly discloses his failures, he has to brace himself for trouble. Both sinners and saints will struggle with that disclosure. The leader who admits personal failure often loses people’s respect, risks being marginalized, and could even lose his job. It’s foolish to not be honest about the risks involved. Admitting your failures invites people to put you in a box and gives them information they could use against you at a later date.

So why would a leader choose honesty, knowing it could be used against him or her? First, if a leader already knows they are their organization’s chief sinner, they aren’t afraid to make that known. Frankly, people don’t need your admissions to help them put you in a box—they have been doing that since day one anyway. But the more you openly name your struggles, the less people can use your silence as a back door to blackmail you, sabotage your leadership, or undermine your

relationships.

Also, openly acknowledging our weaknesses allows other people to join us on the healing path. It enables them to look at their own needs for courage or forgiveness. And it removes the dividing wall of hierarchy and false assumptions about people in power.

How do you embrace honesty? Three ways: give up what is already painfully obvious, tell the truth without telling the whole truth, and embrace the gospel in your failure to live the gospel.

Give up the obvious. Some things are quite clear about you to all who know you. Often there are traits or patterns that people will pick up after only being with you for a few minutes. Some of the most obvious of those include our most common ways of failing to love, especially during times of shame, hurt, or fear. Opening up doesn’t justify our lack, but it does enable us to have a conversation.

Tell some, but not all. There’s no wisdom in telling “the whole truth.” Often it is enough to give the big picture without including every detail. Acknowledging that you lost your temper doesn’t require you to recount every word spoken; struggling with lust doesn’t require every detail to be public.

Embrace the Gospel. No matter how hard we try, failure is inevitable. We will have times we say too little and other times we say too much. Our hidden hurts may color how we tell a story. It’s an odd business: the more I live, the more I fail. The more I fail, fall forward, and am caught by grace, the more I reveal the message

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of the gospel. The more I pretend to have arrived, the more I become like the prodigal's older brother, self-righteous and angry. (Ironically, while few people actually believe they are really mature, we are greatly offended when someone points out how far we are from it. We acknowledge being sinners, but are defensive when it is seen and mentioned publicly).

The character of Jesus balances strength and tenderness. It's usually easier to be one or the other rather than balance them. Those who are strong seldom cry, but also struggle with the need to take responsibility for their failure. The tender seldom risk failure or confront others about their sin. True strength must be courageous enough to confess cowardice and tender enough to admit self-absorption.

Jesus' character also balances wisdom and innocence. But often wisdom masquerades as know-it-all-ism, and naiveté often tries to imitate innocence. Know-it-alls often use knowledge as a weapon to impress and control others; a naïve person avoids facing the dark side of reality by looking through rose-colored glasses. A limping leader embraces both, as well as his inability to successfully live out either one.

Chapter 14: Three Leaders You Can't Do Without—Why You Need a Prophet, a Priest, and a King

Leadership is all about maturity. A leader's first job is to grow, to mature to become more like Jesus. Maturity means having the character of Jesus in how he relates to

others. Jesus was a prophet, a priest, and a king, and we can see aspects of each role in how he related to those around him. Each of us has skills and gifts that place us primarily in one of those categories. Sadly, the crisis, complexity, betrayal, loneliness, and weariness of leadership can transform prophets into trouble-makers, priests into dogmatists, and kings into dictators.

In an organization, all three functions are needed. When we think of leadership, the king is often our primary picture. A king builds infrastructure to provide for the needs of his people and protect them from harm. The king brings order to chaos and moves things forward through a combination of contagious optimism and brutal honesty. Kings oversee personnel and make the tough decisions when needed.

Priests help create meaning for the people in an organization through stories that address three core questions: What is our identity? Where are we from? Where are we going?

Prophets call us to grow, to step into the future God has for us. They call us to embrace difficulty and discipline, and expose our indulgences and self-righteousness. A prophet exposes what is not right in part by arousing dreams of what could be.

These three offices both complement and irritate one another. There will always be conflict and misunderstanding between the three. But if we want to magnify Jesus and become more like him, then we must make room in our organization for each dimension and strive to grow the aspects

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(individually and corporately) that are weak.

We need to put all three types of leaders in a room and invite each of them to value the strengths of the others more than they value their own strengths. Seeing the others as more valuable and necessary can happen only to the degree that each one is a broken and limping leader. Limping leaders know they need one another.

Limping leaders acknowledge and embrace their weaknesses, knowing good can come out of it. Ultimately, a limping leader makes Jesus known as he clings to King Jesus to lead him, Priest Jesus to comfort him, and Prophet Jesus to tell him the truth. We can expect nothing more or less from ourselves and our leaders than to know Jesus better through their brokenness as well as our own. We must demand of ourselves and our leaders to limp and fall forward into the arms of grace.

The Pastor's Perspective

In *Leading With a Limp*, Dan Allender outlines the power and importance of leaders embracing, and being open about, their weaknesses and failings. He goes beyond where most writers about leadership go. It's common to have people talk about the importance of being authentic, for example, but rare to go beyond that to embracing being the "chief sinner" the way Allender describes.

I had mixed feelings about the book. I'm

pretty open with those around me about my weaknesses and struggles, and I get lots of feedback from people about how helpful that is to them. So I agree with the general premise. But I found myself resisting going to the degree that Allender takes it. I'm not sure if it's because *he* takes it too far, or because I don't want to be that vulnerable. I'll be putting more thought into that.

The most powerful part of the book, for me, was the way he described the loneliness of leadership. The reality is that as a leader you have more information than others do, and can't always share it with people. Likewise, you can't always share all the factors that go into decisions you make. That is a set-up for being misunderstood, but unavoidable. And it guarantees an element of loneliness.

The reason that struck me is because it is unusual for the guys I talk with to break it down that way. I know some leaders who resist the idea that loneliness is a part of leadership. They work hard to build a team and try to make decisions by consensus. My observation is that works for a while, but there always comes a time when consensus doesn't happen and the leader needs to actually lead. And, loneliness is part of that package.

It seems to me healthier to acknowledge that loneliness is inherent in leadership. When we accept that, we can also share it with those around us, which actually helps set us free from its power. People around you can't fully understand the pressures you carry, but sharing it at least opens the door for conversation and support.

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So...how open are you with those closest to you?