

Changing Leadership Paradigms

by Bob Young

This article addresses two basic models of church leadership commonly used today. Applications are suggested in both the contemporary North American church context and the Latin American mission field.

Introduction

Because our culture is in transition, models of effective leadership are also in transition. Most of my generation (the Boomers), along with the generation before me and most of the generation after me, knows a model of leadership and planning focused in the left brain. As the 21st century unfolds, a very different model of church leadership is developing. The older, traditional model with which I am familiar is pragmatic, measurable and concrete: plans, desired outcomes, progressive how-to steps to reach the goal. The old familiar model is a top-down model. The developing model turns much of what I have known and practiced upside down. The newer model is decentralized and organic. Direction develops from within the community. Leadership is intuitive and process-oriented rather than product-oriented. Leadership is people-oriented more than task-oriented. The leader's role is to help the community come to grips with its identity and environment in healthy, creative ways.

Traditional Leadership

Many of you who are reading this article are probably in the same boat I am in. I grew up with a church leadership model focused in a group of men who made most if not all of the decisions, developed the plans, hired and fired the ministers, and connected with the mission and benevolent works the local congregation supported. I was trained in this model of church leadership in my baccalaureate degree 40 years ago; it is the basic model I interacted with in doctoral studies 15 years ago. The model is all about taking the appropriate steps: stating a vision or goal, developing people and programs for effective ministry, and evaluating and reorganizing when things are not working. The focus in this model of leadership is on the leaders. Leaders must lead. If no one is following, it is the leader's fault. The leader is the focus, the center around which all revolves. To avoid egotism, we train leaders (and followers) to affirm that Christ is the center. But it remains obvious that the leaders are the focal point from a practical viewpoint. Most of the churches with which I am most familiar are deeply rooted in this model of leadership.

A New Model of Leadership

The developing model of church leadership is reflected in Tim Keel's book, *Intuitive Leadership*. It is not about steps; it is about the story that binds a people together. It is not about a product or goal as much as it is about a process or journey. Leadership is about asking questions more than giving answers. Leadership is about trusting people to be accountable more than making demands and controlling. A parallel to parenting models is instructive: the traditional model often resembles parenting preschoolers while the developing model is more like parenting adult children.

The natural tendency is to discard immediately the new model as unbiblical. After all, we have been studying and using the biblical model of leadership with ministers and elders and

deacons for centuries. The challenge is to come to grips with how much our application of the older model is in reality informed by the culture in which it developed.

Implications for the North American church

If the generational shift has accentuated the need for a new model of leadership and has made apparent the unwillingness of the more recent generations to buy into the previous model, leaders who seek to understand the intuitive leadership concepts Keel sets forth may be able to reconnect with a generation of young people who are largely leaving the church. Keel describes “postures” of leadership which he believes will be effective in the post-modern church. He explains the postures of learning, vulnerability, availability, stillness, surrender, cultivation, trust, joy and dependence.

Implications for leadership in mission efforts

One of the most intriguing applications of Keel’s intuitive leadership model may be in the help it provides for understanding the nature of leadership in cultures outside the typical U.S. or North American cultural context. Many North American missionaries have struggled with the development and appointment of indigenous church leaders in mission contexts. When leadership is measured by our left-brained understanding of Scripture, somehow the natural leaders who arise within the mission context often are fall short.

What if one were looking for a bottom-up leadership model (reminiscent of Jesus’ words in Luke 22)? What if leadership does not necessarily entail a board of directors’ approach? What if leaders live out and model and mentor the reality of discipleship, providing examples as well as information?

Conclusion

Let me challenge us to go back to the Bible. Which model of leadership is most biblical?