

The Need for a Broad Culture of Leader Development

In a world that is constantly changing, one of the few things that remains the same is our need for deeply spiritual and highly competent leaders to whom we can entrust the churches of the future.

Ministries that have sought to address this need have sometimes focused on identifying “high potential” leaders and then giving them specialized training so they can be raised up as quickly as possible and take on important positions within the churches and ministry organizations.

It is certainly true that Jesus focused on a “few,” giving considerable attention to their development before entrusting His future church to them. So, it is certainly appropriate for us to have specific strategies and programs in place to identify and build key emerging leaders.

But there are several potential downsides to this approach if it is our *only* strategy for leader development:

1. If our definitions of “leadership potential” are unclear or too narrow, then we will end up excluding some significant future leaders from our training programs. This will result in fewer leaders overall and we will miss some of the many emerging leaders God has given us.
2. Choosing high potential emerging leaders is, at best, a highly subjective proposition with a significant risk of choosing the wrong ones and neglecting the right ones.
3. When existing leaders are asked to identify emerging leaders, they will often choose someone like themselves. As a result, people who don’t look like current leaders may not be recognized as “high potential” and the status quo – with all its deficiencies – will be endlessly perpetuated.
4. If we place too high an importance on a few emerging leaders, we may set an impossible standard for those few, expecting them to solve all the greatest challenges the ministry faces. This pressure may end up defeating and perhaps even destroying them.
5. If we give all of our best attention to a few, we will inevitably overlook many others who actually do have leadership potential that we simply have not yet recognized. For many, the opportunity to demonstrate leadership may be just around the corner. But if it appears they have been neglected and won’t be given the chance to grow or assume any meaningful responsibility, they may become disheartened, disengaged and passive.
6. It’s extremely difficult to anticipate exactly what changes are coming in the future; consequently, it is equally difficult to predict the specific leadership competencies that will be necessary in the future and should therefore be included in our current leader development programs. We run the risk of development that is too limited in scope.

For these reasons, rather than only having tightly-defined training programs for a few, it is important to nurture a *broad culture of leader development* across the life of our churches and ministries. We might even think of this as a culture of “people development” so that our thinking is not limited to those who are clearly and currently “high potential emerging leaders.”

If we nurture a broad culture of people development, then we will have leaders naturally rising up when we need them, and they will be more likely to have the necessary capacities to think and act and lead in the specific context and time they are needed.

This is a considerably more expansive approach to leader development than is followed in most churches and ministries. Generally speaking, the few churches that do give attention to building the next generation focus only on a few (usually academically-gifted) individuals while treating the rest of the generation as needy objects of ministry.

We must recognize the rich potential of the entire next generation – not only those few who meet our limited criteria for “leadership.” We need to build *life* across our churches and ministries. This was Paul’s vision for the church:

... speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph. 4:15-16)

This is an enormous paradigm shift and will require a deep change of thinking across our churches and ministry organizations.

While not everyone will be an organizational leader, in reality every follower of Jesus is a “high-potential” person! Every disciple needs to be built, to be challenged, to be trusted, to be mentored, to be taught, to be inspired to rise up to change their city and their nation.

In this kind of organizational culture, our need for leaders will not go unmet. In fact, we will have no lack of leaders; they will rise up naturally and organically in every corner of the ministry! Moreover, our leader development programs will not suffer either. Those programs will be greatly enhanced by the constant and pervasive “life-building” all around them; every emerging leader will be both giving and receiving life nurture within the community.

Just as Jesus (Mark 3:13-18) and Paul (Acts 19:9-10; 2 Tim. 3:10-17) gave special attention to building a few key leaders, so also must we. But such programs need to be integrated into the life and ministry of the local churches, and must not represent the entirety of our strategy to build the next generation of leaders.

TRADITIONAL PARADIGM	BIBLICAL PARADIGM
LEADER DEVELOPMENT ...	
<p>is a program of a few by a few experts occurs mostly in programs mainly builds competencies perpetuates the status quo</p>	<p>is a culture of many by the whole community occurs mostly in life builds the whole life unleashes future potential that may look dramatically different from today</p>
POTENTIAL LEADERS ...	
<p>are only a few are mostly visible and known are much the same as current leaders are only those who will likely have an official leadership position in the future</p>	<p>are many may be currently unnoticed are widely diverse are everywhere across the life of the community</p>

In our churches we cannot afford to continue to ignore the massive potential that the people of God represent. The next generation must be built – every child, every disciple, every believer.

Clearly this cannot be accomplished only by a few experts leading a few formal programs. If every member of the Body of Christ is to be built, then every member must be engaged in that building process. *In the healthy church, every member builds others.* Practically, this means that every member in the church must share the vision for building people and have at least a basic capacity to do so.

Here are some specific ways to nurture this broad culture of people-building:

- Mobilize prayer across the community for God to raise up every member of His church to maturity.
- Frequently share a compelling vision for building the next generations.
- Reinforce the principle that “leadership” is not merely a title or position, but it means to *effectively think and act in order to help others move to a better place, and everyone can and should do that!*
- Provide basic training for everyone on discipleship and leader development. The ConneXions Model provides an excellent framework for people-building that can be understood and implemented by anyone in any ministry context.¹
- Start early with children. It’s never too early to start building the next generation!
- Ensure that every leader builds others. Don’t let anyone simply do ministry work without at the same time also building the next generation.
- Encourage everyone to reflect on who they are, how God has made them, and what their God-given purposes are.

- Deliberately create opportunities for continuous growth and learning for everyone. Be sure those opportunities are “4D” – including spiritual, relational, experiential and instructional dynamics.
- Encourage everyone to have personal growth goals and strategies, even if very simple ones.
- Promote a more team-oriented approach to ministry work rather than leadership being the exclusive domain of a small group of “leaders.” This is not only a healthier approach to leadership, but it will engage many more people.
- Provide opportunities for everyone to receive feedback on both their strengths and their potential opportunities in the future of the ministry.
- Publicly celebrate empowerment, innovation and responsible action when it occurs.
- In the midst of this broadly-distributed building and empowerment, continuously watch for those who “pop up” as having potential for more senior leadership roles and then provide the appropriate 4D opportunities for them.
- Finally, don’t expect perfection. Building people is a messy thing! Trust God to lead you in this. It’s His vision to build His people!

FURTHER INFORMATION

For our complete models, please see: *Healthy Leaders: SpiritBuilt Leadership #2* and *Building Leaders: SpiritBuilt Leadership #4* by Malcolm Webber.

LeaderSource SGA
513 South Main St., Suite 2
Elkhart, IN 46516
Email: info@leadersource.org
Website: www.leadersource.org

¹ Please see the LeaderSource course, “Building Healthy Leaders.”