



# Developing Leaders in the Church

## *for the Church and the World*

*John Purcell*

Craig's church is in crisis. He has five elders, and two of them have made his life as Pastor of the church absolutely miserable over the last year. He thought they were spiritually mature when they ordained and installed them as elders a year and a half ago. They were managers in their businesses, and the church needed leaders, so they elected them. Craig can now see that they were not as mature as he thought. Now what does he do? And how does he develop the kind of leaders the church needs?

The effectiveness of our organizations, churches, non-profits, governments, and businesses alike is directly related to the quality of the leaders of those organizations. We probably know of few of those that are not in great need of more and better leaders. And with the Baby Boom generation retiring and being phased out, Peter Drucker said repeatedly over the last few years of his life that this demographic shift will certainly take the need for leaders to crisis proportions.

So, we need to develop leaders, more leaders and good leaders. When I facilitate a church in the process of Ministry and Strategic Planning, the planning team usually comes up with "developing leaders" as a key goal, if not the number one goal for their future effectiveness. Then comes the great question, "But, how do we do this? How does any organization develop leaders?"

### **Oswald Sanders<sup>1</sup>**

*Leadership training cannot be done on a mass scale. It requires patient, careful instruction and prayerful, personal guidance over a considerable time. Disciples are not manufactured wholesale. They are produced one by one, because someone has taken the pains to discipline, to instruct and enlighten, to nurture and train one that is younger.*

There are hundreds and hundreds of books in our bookstores on the subject of leadership, but there are few on HOW leaders are developed. The implication is that if we read books on how someone else led, whether it be Lincoln or Genghis Kahn, and books with lists of the best leadership practices, then we will somehow be able to become leaders and then continue to grow in our leadership effectiveness. Does that make sense? Compare that to becoming an accomplished golfer. If we read books about great golfers and about how to perfect a swing, a putt, and

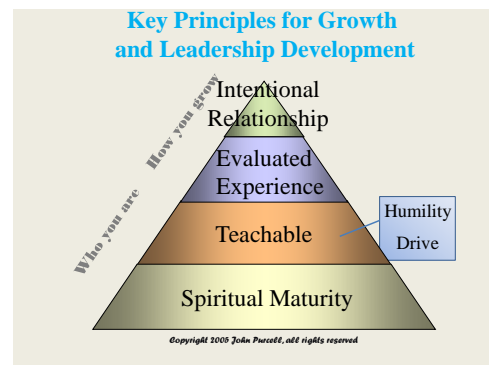
course management, will we be able to play better and better golf? In fact, I can personally attest that trying to apply a new swing that I read about will make me a *worse* golfer. There's something called a "performance dip" that occurs whenever we apply a new approach to any skill, and we're not likely to stick with it long enough to get out of the dip, let alone become better than when we started.<sup>2</sup>

Well, then, how do we develop leaders? To start with, we have to define the target. How are we defining a leader, and what kind of leader do we need for a specific role? Without going into the whole discussion here of various definitions of leadership, my favorite definition that boils it down to the core is that leadership is "influence." By this definition, we should **all** be exhibiting leadership in any role we have. In

particular, as Christians we are responsible for being “salt and light” (Matt 5:13-16), influencing the world around us with Christ’s love. So growth as a Christian should include growth in our leadership. This will mean different things for different people, with all of us being called to influence in one-on-one and small group relationships and some of us being capable of growing into more “public” and formal leadership roles. So we can add to this core definition according to the specific leadership role. We will look at this shortly.

First, let’s examine the four key principles that apply to all growth and leadership development. The first two principles I call the “who you are” of leadership development. First, select carefully the person in whom you will invest, as one who has the *foundational values and maturity* required for the position. In the church, this means selecting people with the required level of *spiritual maturity* for leadership roles, because then they will have the necessary Christian values and walk to base their leadership decisions and judgments on Biblical principles (Titus 1:9). (In other types of organizations, select people that totally endorse and exemplify the core values of those organizations.)

Secondly, select people who are *teachable*. Why? Because you will be investing leadership development effort and resources in them, and you want them to pay off. Also, you want leaders who will continue to grow and develop and become more valuable to the organization and relate to others as they lead them. But what does it take to be “teachable?” When I was pursuing a sabbatical study on the subject of “leadership development in the church,” I interviewed a master level life coach who told me, “John, in my experience as a coach, I find that only about 35% of people are coachable.” Wow! Why would that be? Well, my assessment is that teachability or coachability is dependent on people having two character traits that usually don’t occur in the same person – humility and drive. This is the humility to realize that there is a gap between where they are and their potential and the humility to allow others to help them get there. And it is the drive to do the hard work that it will take to change and grow, to discard old habits and put on new ones, to endure the “performance dip” and stay the course until the new habits become permanent ones. (Prov 2:2-6).



So, we select those with the key character traits of leadership development – *having the foundational values and maturity and being teachable*.

The next two principles I call the “how you grow” of leadership development. To uncover the first one, I ask you to fill in the blanks of these two well-known sayings. “\_\_\_\_\_ is the best teacher” and “You can’t teach \_\_\_\_\_ new tricks.” I know you got the words right, but how can experience be the best teacher if you can’t you teach old dogs new tricks, because old dogs have the most experience? Well, it turns out that it is a very special kind of experience that really is the best teacher, and that is *evaluated experience*.<sup>3</sup> We can learn from experience, but only if we take the time and effort to objectively evaluate what happened, why, what we did, what others did, what worked, what didn’t work, what else we could have done, etc. etc. (James 1:2-4). And the major challenge here is that I am the least objective person about myself and therefore not effective at evaluating my own experiences alone.

That leads us to the fourth principle, which is *intentional relationship*. I need someone objective in my life to help me with the evaluation of my experiences in order to learn. Let's take that example of becoming a better golfer. I can read about it, hit thousands of balls on the driving range, and play hundreds of rounds of the game. But I need a coach to evaluate my swing, stance, pace, etc., and I need to apply his advice to targeted practice, get reevaluated, refocus, and so on until I achieve a more correct swing that becomes a new habit that I can more or less consistently apply. Only then will I become a better golfer. (Prov 1:5-6).

We can summarize these two “how you grow” principles in one statement, *we grow from evaluating our experiences through intentional relationships*.

We can test these principles by comparing them to sports, which have athletic coaches, or to the skilled trades, which for at least 4000 years have had an apprenticeship plan, and we see that the principles are consistent with traditional and successful, skill-building approaches. What has perhaps not been as evident to us is that leadership is actually also a set of skills. It is something we *do*, not just knowledge in our heads. Why would leadership development not work the same way then?

Now comes the double application of these principles in the realm of developing leaders in the church. If the first principle is to select people with the requisite level of spiritual maturity, then how do we develop those people? The answer is to apply these same growth principles to help them grow spiritually, and we call that *life-on-life* discipleship. A discipler begins by recruiting one or a few people who are teachable, with the humility and drive to grow spiritually. He or she then provides the intentional relationship that helps others to evaluate their experiences as they struggle to live the Christian life, studying God's Word, under the power of the Holy Spirit. A discipleship group can do this with each other, under the supervision of a discipleship leader, with the impact of “iron sharpening iron” (Prov 27:17). The discipler focuses not only on spiritual formation but also specifically on leadership development according to the potential of each person. If this sounds familiar, it's because Someone you know applied this approach 2000 years ago, and it must have worked, because we are here discussing it today. This is working in a small number of churches today that apply a heart for real, authentic relationship, the core principles that Christ used, and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about transformation. Is this kind of discipleship truly foundational to developing leaders? One example of a church that has been doing it for 17 years, Perimeter Church in Atlanta, now has 260 ordained and Biblically-qualified Elders in addition to hundreds of other spiritual leaders, and the leaders there believe this is a direct result of years of life-on-life discipleship.<sup>4</sup>

These disciplers then must “deploy” the new leaders into ministry. That means they help the disciples/leader apprentices discover their best place to engage as a leader – their calling. One of my favorite descriptions of this place is where the leader's talent, passion, and conscience interact with a need. Steven Covey calls this the person's “voice.”<sup>5</sup> One of the jobs of the discipler to help people find their “voices.”



But we also have to ask what kind of leader we need for a given role. We should define the role, the information, specific skills, and the other attributes needed to perform well in the role. Then we can go about the task of comparing the candidate or even current resident to the needs and intentionally design *experiences* that will help them grow in skills where they fall short.

Here is where we have to resist many of our past practices and cultural approaches to “training,” which typically include exposing the person to information coming in the form of books, seminars, classes, manuals, articles, etc. These are all very good tools; however, by themselves, they only meet the raw information requirement of a position. They won’t develop leadership **skills** any more than a book on golf develops good golfers. Doing only the traditional kind of training and then deploying someone into a leadership role can create a disillusioned leader, discouraged followers, and mediocre or failed ministry.

But who in the church is in a position to work with someone to help them develop the applied understanding and skills for a leadership role? True discipleship leaders should be able to do this. Also, those in existing leadership roles should be able to do this. But these are paradigm shifts of a major magnitude for both disciplers and other leaders. Typically, disciplers are about “spiritual maturity” and leaders are about getting the ministry job done. Both **MUST** have as one of their goals the specific goal of developing the leadership of those in their care.

So our first leadership development void in the church is discipleship. The second one is leaders having the goal to develop other leaders through intentional experiences. The third void actually occurs **after** people enter official leadership roles. We then seem to expect them to be smart and mature enough to continue their own growth. Think about the maturity of many of our top leaders in any field. Do they get more and more skilled or does their growth stop? What’s at work here is not just the “Peter Principle” but more often the growth principles. Studies have shown that the higher up people are in their organizations, the less feedback they get on their own performance. What leaders need is the great gift of relationships

where they are receiving objective, honest feedback that is being added to their training and leadership experiences. My favorite description of this person they need is a “*leadership coach*.” If we want our leaders to continue to grow, both spiritually and in leadership skills and effectiveness, then we must provide them with such a coach to facilitate growth through relationship.

## Leadership Coaching

- **Shepherding**

Caring for the heart and soul of a leader

- **Mentoring**

Sharing wisdom and advice out of your own experiences

- **Coaching**

Asking powerful questions to draw out what God has put into a leader

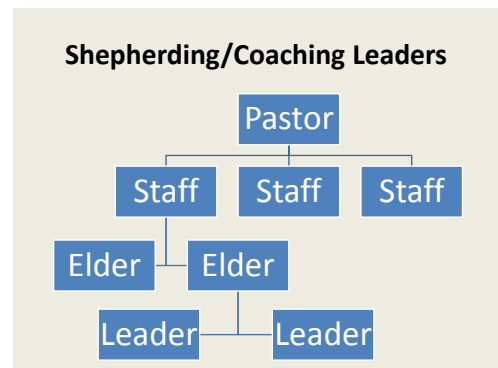
Let’s dig into the role of *leadership coach* just a little bit.

Many of us are at least somewhat familiar with the executive or life coach. In the pure coaching profession the definition of

coaching is, “Asking powerful questions to draw out of others the wisdom and experience that is already in them.” The *leadership coach* needs to have that skill and operate primarily out of that point of view. However, in the church this person needs to apply two other skills. One is “shepherding,” or caring about and for the leader’s life, soul, and continued spiritual formation. The other skill is called “mentoring,” which is defined as providing advice and counsel that comes out of one’s own experiences and knowledge. In a sense, this is all really the continuation of the discipling we discussed above, but in a more targeted, mostly one-on-one approach.

However, attempts to “coach” leaders in our churches have in past years been almost universally a great failure. In fact, 5 years ago when I did a study on this subject, I talked with many of the large, well-known “leading edge” churches in the country who were giving up on it. I myself was actually a part of one of these early efforts many years ago. From personal experience, I believe the reason for the failures has been a wrong approach to leadership coaching, which we can now better understand using the three roles we have discussed – shepherding, mentoring, and coaching. Past “coaching” efforts really never applied coaching at all, but took the approach of either just coming alongside the leader as a friend or as a mentor only. Either approach sets the coach up for failure. Our leaders are very busy people who don’t have time for assigned friendships that don’t benefit their leadership or for assigned mentors who are really peer leaders giving advice. However, there is a new movement of training coaches in churches in the skills of pure coaching (question-asking approach). I think there is also a risk here of limiting the relationship to just this approach, just as the former efforts were limited to just the other approaches. We can be successful in this effort to the extent we can select leadership coaches that begin with a heart for the leader as a child of God and then equip them with the skills to shepherd, coach, and mentor. (1 Pet 5).

An ideal culture in a church would be one where all the people are growing all the time. Based on these principles for growth, that would mean lots of intentional relationships such as disciplers and coaches, with, again ideally, all leaders being coached and all coaches being coached.



So, leadership development must go far beyond books, far beyond classes, and far beyond self-development. It must go all the way to values, humility, drive, and experiences, all working together for growth through intentional relationships. As Robert Coleman says in his classic book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, “The costly principles of leadership development and reproduction seem to have been submerged beneath the easier strategy of mass recruitment.” When we are finally ready to truly invest in hearts by applying these principles, only then will we be able to develop in and through our churches the leadership potential that God has put in each of us and the spiritual leadership that not only our churches but also our society so badly needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders, J. Oswald, *Spiritual Leadership*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994, 150

<sup>2</sup> Rackham, Neil. “The Coaching Controversy.” *Training and Development Journal*, 1979: 12-16

<sup>3</sup> Lee Ellis, *Leading Talents, Leading Teams*. Chicago: Northfield, 2003), 39

<sup>4</sup> Pope, Randy, *The Intentional Church*. Chicago: Moody Press, 2006, 211-220

<sup>5</sup> Covey, Steven, *The Eighth Habit*. New York: Free Press, 2004, 5