

Growing Through Different Stages of Ministry

Leadership in business and in the church

Bill Hybels of **Willow Creek** tells the story of a friend who is a successful business man.

*'My friend runs a company of about 3000 employees. He says he wants to relax after retirement and lead a church. He says it doesn't have to be a Willow Creek style church, maybe just 7000 or 8000 with some growth potential. **I told him that leading a church would ruin his retirement because it demands a higher and more complex form of leadership than business does.**'*

I think this statement is true. I've done the business thing. When you run a business you can hire a bright, energetic, young employee and say, 'Here's our vision, here's your part in it, here's your salary, here are your perks, here's your car, here's your phone, here's your secretary, here's your office, here are your holiday prospects, here's your promotion and here are your share options.'

As a church leader what do you tell your prospective church members? 'You are depraved, degenerate sinners who are going to hell unless you repent and get sorted out with Christ – and that's the good news!' Then we tell them, 'We're going to ask you to commit to 5 to 6 hours per week in ministry, with 2 to 3 additional hours for discipleship. We're going to ask you to get into a small group where your character flaws are going to be exposed and be chiselled away. We're going to ask you to come under the authority of the elders of the church and give a minimum of 10% of your money - and by the way, there are no reserve seats, no special privileges and no voting rights.'

That's the comparison between running a business and leading a church – and this is before we get into the area of the **demands of pastoral leadership**, where, on average, you would speak at a meeting of some kind once a week, often more. There is **pastoral pressure – expectations that people have**. There are **financial challenges**. *You have to manage your family and work balance right. In business your family can implode and you can carry on in your job – in the church you are an example in all you say and do and a wrecked marriage can end a fruitful ministry.* The requirements for church leadership are high, very high.

While I acknowledge that those in business have high demands on them too, I believe that Hybels has something important to say here.

Guiding principles for training leaders

There are **two guiding principles** that God uses in training leaders.

Firstly, upon successful completion of a ministry task the developing leader is usually given a bigger task.

Secondly, every leader that God uses in any capacity must undergo preparation in order to function in that capacity.

When I first felt that God was calling me into leadership, I thought I was going to Spurgeon's College. That was delayed for 7 or 8 years. **How I coped with that delay was more important than I realised at the time.**

A Biblical parallel would be **Joseph** – a great model of **God's progression of a leader**. Firstly, he has a *dramatic prophetic revelation*, which he misuses by boasting to his brothers about his own future greatness. The result is that they kick him out of the family – *his arrogance has dire repercussions*. In *slavery* he begins to get some *responsibility* – he runs the household and does it well but then comes under a test, *a moral test*. Again, he responds well.

If you are in leadership, you will come under moments of temptation. How you respond will totally affect your future ministry. If you blow it, recovery is possible – but at a cost.

Despite his good result in the moral test he ends up in prison. Here he gains **credibility**, he's *faithful in the tasks he is assigned*. His God-given ability to interpret dreams brings him to the attention of those in authority and it looks like he's going to get out of prison, although that doesn't happen for about another two years.

Delays!

Have you felt that your ministry has been delayed? *The older you are, the harder it can be to deal with delay*. When you're young and are asked to do the Tearcraft stall and open up the building you just think – I can do that! You're not thinking of yourself as a leader at that moment, there's not much temptation to over-inflate your role. But later, if a senior leader gets ahead of themselves and their ability or anointing, **it can become a limiting factor to their ministry**.

Eventually, after much delay, **Joseph** is brought out of prison to serve in one of the highest offices in the land. He is given responsibility over the nation in a critical time with prophetic fulfilment of his early dreams when his brothers come seeking help in the context of the famine.

Then there's the story of **David**. Where's David at the start of the story? Not even asked to the meal with the rest of his brothers when the important priest visits, because he's the youngest and is looking after the sheep. *And even when he is asked for and is anointed for kingship by Samuel, what does he do? Returns to the sheep!* I found that so helpful and have applied it to my life at various times. If you try to grab at the opportunity in church life, it slips away.

*So, the **principle** is – upon successful completion of a ministry task, a leader is usually asked to do something else but not before there is some form of testing.*

Types of testing for leaders

1. The Frustration Test.

This is the **test of delay at the start of ministry**. You have a prophetic word over your life, but it's not happening yet. *The purpose of this test is to help the developing leader grow in faith*. This 'time test' also purifies the leader's **motives** and **attitude** – if he allows it to. During the time of delay the leader in question can deal with his own impure, selfish or proud motives that can cloud the purposes of God.

When I was 25 I was put forward to be an elder at the church at Brickhill. I had been sitting in on elders' meetings for about 3 years and was regularly preaching and leading worship. What happened was that the second tier of church

leadership, who were nearly all old enough to be my parents, didn't respond positively to this idea. There was much discussion about me and my relative youth and I got caught in the crossfire. What do you do?

I decided to write a letter. *'Dear Church, I'm aware that my proposed eldership has caused difficulty for some and the last thing that I want to do is cause disunity in the church, so I'm happy to withdraw my name for going forward as an elder. I will continue to serve the church as I've always done. Yours, Steve.'* This was read out to the church.

What happened? Those who had previously thought that I wasn't mature enough and ready for the responsibility began to say 'I think I got it wrong'. Truthfully, to get to the point where I wrote that letter took some emotional journey for me as I was confronted with the fact that they didn't recognise me as a leader. **We all crave recognition. I had to die to that recognition and live to God.** Two years later I became an elder.

2. The Servant Test.

Are you willing to serve? We all have to start out with this question. *When we were younger we were happy to serve. As we 'progress' it's easy to lose that servant heart.* I may not put out as many chairs in meetings as I used to but I hope that I still pass the servant test and think about the needs of others and get a cup of tea for the team members occasionally!

3. The Submission Test.

When you're asked to do something by God or by someone else that counters your own plans or desires, *are you willing to submit to God's purposes* - right now? Anyone can submit - if it's something that you want. What about when I don't agree with what I'm being asked to do? **If you are going to administer authority then you also need to be under authority.**

4. The Conflict Test.

This is a **relational test** - *it's about your ability to cope with conflict and work it through.* When you start out you will have a senior leader - you are dependent on that leader. Your relationship is that of a junior to a senior. Over time, your relationship with that leader will change. *As you grow you will seek more independence, feel the need for elbow room, for space to grow.* This is a classic point of conflict and if leaders are not aware of this dynamic, i.e. the senior guy says in effect - 'Get back in place!', then the junior guy is likely to leave before too long. **The aim is to grow to interdependence.** When I started at King's and **Phil Varley** came to join us, he lived at our house. I was the pastor and he was giving the church some time. Now he's the executive pastor of the team and one of the elders. **The relationship has transitioned to that of peers.** We have open, equal conversations and speak into each others' lives. That's the way it works.

In the hand of God, conflict is a powerful tool - *how you process conflict is important.* It can shipwreck you - or be a channel for growth. When the eldership team that I had joined in Bedford 'blew up' I had the opportunity to learn this lesson first hand. I had seen conflict take other leaders apart. I didn't want that to happen to me. I learned a lot about team dynamics. I learnt a lot about the amount of authority that the pastor has - especially if he has been there a long time. *I learnt a lot about myself and my dependency on God.*

I had never planned to be in London. If there hadn't been conflict I would have remained in that provincial town and would not have had the privilege of coming here and seeing all that we are seeing. *I would never have done it because I had my future all sorted out!* So – I now know that God can use conflict and that there are times when we need to embrace it!!

Not that you seek it – 'let's go and create mayhem in our team so I can learn from the conflict...' *Rather, wisdom shows us how to stand back and say, 'God, what are you saying to me here? What are you teaching me in this situation? Don't let me become bitter or lose my heart for You!'*

5. The Promotion Test

Here I'm talking about **delay in promotion** or a **failure to recognise your gift for someone already established in ministry**. When a leader finds that he or she is not moving forward in ministry, that's the promotion test. Tempted to become angry, bitter at the lack of progress and being shut off from influence in life and ministry - this can happen at any age and any season – at any point in ministry. *The more developed the gift or ministry, the harder this is likely to be to endure.*

At the same time we have to recognise that **at some point we all reach our limit**. We come to the end of the amount of grace we have for the measure we are. It takes real maturity to get to a point of recognition, *'This is my measure of achievement. I'm going to be satisfied with it rather than always wanting to be something else.'*

The alternative is real unhappiness and a grinding sense of disappointment. **Such a situation, like many personal crises of this kind, needs to be resolved before God and lived out before men.**

There is a huge range of negative emotions that can accompany such situations. Anger, resentment, a sense of hurt, isolation, rejection, bitterness, feeling misunderstood, loneliness – all these are possible. Some leaders fall into depression. I'm not talking about sin here – it's about life. How you process the emotions could be the thing that makes you, or disqualifies you...

How you handle these various tests will have huge influence on how you progress to the next phase of life and leadership.

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