

We Have A Problem! - But There Is Hope! - Results of a Survey of 1,000 Christian Leaders from Across the Globe

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Introduction

We have a leadership problem! And it is a problem that must be solved in order for World Evangelization to flourish! Too often evangelism is done successfully, a church is planted and begins to flourish, but then a leader is appointed who sadly destroys everything that was built, and the fruit is lost. While there are many variations on the story, its theme is much too familiar.

The Lausanne Leadership Development Working Group was created to respond to this need for Christ-like leaders. The working group is made up of a cross section of global senior leaders in the Body of Christ, many of whom are specifically involved in leadership development.

We started with a survey of Christian leaders. We asked them to tell us about their experiences with Christian leaders, what they thought Christ-like leadership should look like, and what they thought was most effective in building Christ-centered leaders.

We collected responses from 1,031 leaders from across seven continents. Those surveyed included a wide range of ages, types of leadership experience and quantities of leadership experience. Approximate one-third of those surveyed were women. We conducted the survey in five languages to try to get a wide range of opinions.

In the process of conducting the survey, one thing became frighteningly obvious—we have a leadership problem! First we will see how our respondents defined the problem, then how they defined Christ-like leadership and finally how they described the best methods of developing leaders as a partial solution to the problem.

(To view survey results to non-short answer questions, see separate document entitled: "Appendix: Leadership Development Survey")

1. We have a Problem!

If we look around us at the cry for Christ-centered leadership, it becomes clear that something is terribly wrong in our world. Survey respondents easily identified the characteristics of a Christ-like leader, but pointed out that many leaders they had worked for fell painfully short.

When asked to describe their worst experiences working under leaders, and what characteristics those poor leaders

had, 1,000 leaders answering the survey said:

- Proudful, always right, and always the big boss
- Lack of integrity, untrustworthy
- Harsh, uncaring, refused to listen, critical

Slightly lower on the list:

- Inability to manage people and enable them to work together
- Spiritually immature, no evidence of holiness or prayerfulness

Keep in mind that these descriptors were not used to describe non-Christian leaders, but rather “Christian” leaders, or those who said they were “Christian.” Too often it seems, the motivation to aspire to leadership stems from ambition and pride. We believe we can do it better than “they” did. We set out to prove something to someone, or to ourselves. We want to be in control of the situation to hide our own insecurities and failures. The result of this brand of leadership is tragic.

Leaders in our survey were also asked a similar question in a different way but the results were strikingly similar. They were asked, “From the list below, choose up to five of the most pressing issues facing Christian leaders in your nation.”

The most frequent response to this question was “Personal Pride,” followed by “Lack of Integrity,” then two hundred votes further down the list were “Spiritual Warfare,” “Corruption” and “Lack of Infrastructure.”

The only exception to this ranking by language group was the French group who put the top pressing issues as “Poverty,” “Lack of Infrastructure,” “Corruption” and then “Personal Pride.”

This emphasis on the issue of “Personal Pride” could be surprising when compared with issues facing leaders like poverty and corruption. But on closer reflection, this points out the vast damage done by the disease of “big boss” leadership which is the very antithesis of the servant leadership style of Jesus.

Christ-like leadership is a challenge because it is inherently counter-cultural in every setting. It goes against the very essence of our selfish human nature. It is antithetical to our sinful nature.

And it seems too few of us have experienced Christ-centered leadership. We have rarely seen models of the type of leader we aspire to be. Perhaps this is why the hunger for mentoring today is so high.

2. Defining Christ-centered Leadership

The task of defining Christ-centered leadership is not simple. It is potentially fraught with theological controversy. Even the term leadership can be difficult to define. Yet in spite of these obvious challenges, let’s address this task as simply and as straightforwardly as possible, aiming to clarify the term for common usage.

In its simplest form, leadership has often been defined as “influence.” If this definition is acceptable, then we might say that Christ-centered leadership equals “Jesus style influence.” We could stop there, but the phrase “Jesus style influence” also begs more definition.

To describe what “Jesus style influence” looks like, one option is to turn to the example of Jesus and begin to list the traits that he exhibited while leading his disciples here on earth. When 1,000 Christian leaders across the globe were surveyed, the top three ranking characteristics that described Christ-centered leadership were:

- Integrity, authenticity, excellent character
- Servant’s heart, humble

- Spiritually mature, hears God's voice, holy and prayerful

Next on the list came:

- Excellent people management skills and ability to discern and develop the gifts of others
- Biblical knowledge, theologically sound
- Compassionate, good listener, more oriented to people than accomplishing the task

So we can conclude simply that anyone with influence who has these qualities and uses them to further God's Kingdom goals is, in fact, a Christ-centered leader.

While each of us is born with gifts and personality traits, if one asks the familiar question, "Are leaders born or made?" as evangelicals we believe that all people are born in need of the saving grace of God. Hence it is impossible to be "born" a Christ-centered leader no matter how "gifted" one might be.

The ultimate challenge is that leaders always lead out of who they are, out of what is inside them, or we might say out of a set of internalized core values. The only possible way to exhibit traits of Christ-centered leadership is, in fact, to be Christ-centered. Of course the first step to becoming Christ-centered is inviting Christ into your life. However as we have noted through our survey results, being a believer in Christ and being a Christ-centered leader are not synonymous. To become a Christ-centered leader is an undertaking for which a lifetime is too short.

One conclusion we must then draw is that Christ-centered leadership is not a goal to achieve, but rather a lifetime journey to undertake. And so the next question that springs to mind is where do we get the map for this journey and what is the best means of transportation?

3. Describing Best Practices in Leadership Development

If Christ-centered leadership is the goal, but does not come "naturally" to anyone, and if it is a lifetime undertaking, which we cannot do on our own, how does leadership development take place? How do Christian leaders develop into leaders who are truly "Christ-centered" in their leadership? This is one of the most challenging and confusing topics within the Global Church today.

What is Leadership Development?

One of the reasons this subject is so confusing is that almost anything that contributes to the growth, discipleship, skills or knowledge of an individual can arguably be called "leadership development." Everything from Sunday school picnics to seminary education can qualify. Mentoring, accountability groups, special workshops, basic Bible training, executive management sessions, interactive adult education—the list seems endless.

According to the old adage of the blind man and the elephant, if you cannot see the entire beast, then wherever you touch the elephant, a different picture will emerge. When you touch the trunk you think an elephant must look like a snake. If you touch the side, you believe an elephant looks more like a hippopotamus. As a result, it is nearly impossible to obtain a clear picture of true leadership, particularly with so many initiatives claiming to focus on "leadership development." Therefore the term has nearly lost its meaning.

This dilemma prompts another proverb—"How do you eat an elephant?" One bite at a time, of course! Breaking the elephant of "leadership development" into bite-size pieces is probably the best and most helpful approach and may help us even see the overall "beast" more clearly. This leads to two questions regarding leadership development: (1) What are you trying to accomplish and (2) With whom are you trying to accomplish it?

Using this approach, all leadership development efforts can be organized on a simple matrix with two axes: (1) Axis #1: the goal to be accomplished (i.e. the content to be learned or character qualities to be developed, and (2) Axis #2:

the target audience. On the one hand, what characteristics of a Christ-centered leader is your program, school or course trying to develop? What is the content you are trying to teach? On the other hand, who is it you are trying to develop—teenagers, Bible scholars or seminary presidents? What would be the best method or means of development for this group in this context?

After obtaining this information, one can begin to develop the best plan for achieving this type of character development or knowledge impartation in this group of people. How you develop integrity in a teenager in Mongolia would look quite different than helping a pastor learn Greek in Kansas. Yet both are needed for the body of Christ, both are valid and yes—both are “leadership development.”

What Is the Most Important Subject Matter?

There are continual calls for more leadership and better leadership development, but there has been little agreement as to what this should look like. Rather than tackle the entire field, the working group narrowed the “target” to the development of “Christ-centered leaders.”

Survey results of Christian leaders helped us focus on the subject matter, character traits and knowledge required. Christian leaders prioritized the traits of a Christ-like leader as follows:

- Integrity, authenticity, excellent character
- Servant’s heart, humble
- Spiritually mature, hears God’s voice, holy and prayerful
- Excellent people management skills and ability to discern and develop the gifts of others
- Biblical knowledge, theologically sound
- Compassionate, good listener, more oriented to people than accomplishing the task

If we attempt to differentiate character qualities from knowledge the lists would grow quite long and the process be very confusing. Take, for example, just the first bullet listed. There we start with “integrity.” Integrity is of course a character quality so that means that something more than just objective knowledge is needed to develop integrity. Character is not primarily developed in the classroom but through life experience, mentors, models and accountability.

But thoroughly understanding and developing integrity also requires knowledge. For instance one would want to study about what the Bible has to say about integrity. Assuming a leader wants to have integrity in all aspects of his/her life this would lead to studying many further subjects, like marriage and family, management of money, and how to stop corruption. This is why the development of leaders is both a complex and life-long endeavor and why many methods are needed.

Which Subjects Do We Begin with Today?

When 1,000 leaders were asked the question, “If you had the opportunity to take classes in leadership development right now, what subjects would be of most interest to you?” their top prioritized choices included:

- Mentoring/coaching
- Prayer and the Personal Life of a Leader
- People Management
- Conflict Resolution
- Strategic Planning

One of the first steps in leadership development is to start with the “felt need,” or what leaders feel is missing and sense that they need. All adult learners are more motivated to learn what they know they need and can apply immediately. For leaders, this is possibly even truer because they are such busy people and their time is so limited.

If the subject is not a desperate need or a deep interest, they will probably not invest the necessary time.

To approach this issue of critical subjects to be taught leaders from a another angle, we asked a different question: "What would you say is the most frequent cause of failure in Christian leaders to 'finish well' as a Christ-centered leader in the nation where you are currently living?" Respondents could pick three answers. Five of the ten possibilities received the vast majority of the votes. The top five included:

- Burn-out (360)
- Abuse of power (360)
- Inappropriate use of finances (354)
- Inordinate Pride (353)
- Lack of growth in their Spiritual Life (349)

The sixth cause ranked was "sexual sin" with 292 votes.

Again, the complexity of how to best grow leaders is evident. If "burn-out" is one of the biggest causes of leaders failing, what is the antidote? Is it better time management, better delegation skills, a better theology about work, a better understanding of God, a better insight into one's culture, a better self-concept, a better understanding of God's love, or all of the above? A list of possible causes and possible responses becomes longer and longer and arguably, all are critical!

For any leader, a long list of critical subjects must be considered relevant in this journey toward Christ-like leadership. Bible knowledge and theology, leadership and management training, and spiritual formation and character development make up three heavily overlapping areas within which most of these subjects can arguably fall.

Determining which leadership development subject is most important to a leader at any given time is more of an art than a science. It is dependent upon that individual's personality and gifts, his/her past experience and training, and the demands of his/her current context. What is easier to discern is that all leaders need to be growing in all of these areas throughout each one's lifetime.

Which Forms or Methods of Leadership Development are Best?

According to language groups surveyed, one of the few places where results varied in the survey of 1,000 leaders was in response to the question: "What types or forms of leadership development opportunities do you wish you had access to?" Otherwise the results of the survey were rarely distinguishable from one language group to the next.

The options given in this question were mentoring, classes, workshops, books, feedback from staff, informal discussion with peers, internet resources, small accountability group, observing others, none at this time and other.

In English the top answers were:

- Mentoring
- Small accountability group
- Informal discussion with peers
- Workshops

In Spanish the top answers were:

- Mentoring
- Feedback from staff
- Workshops
- Informal discussion with peers

In French the answers changed even more:

- Workshops
- Mentoring and classes were equal
- Books
- Internet resources

Perhaps this gives us an indicator of what is not available in each setting. It may also tell us more about what different cultures value in leader development or what they believe is critical.

What is perhaps most important to take away at this point is that no type or opportunity for leadership development should be given all the attention in any setting. Rather a well-rounded array of opportunities is invaluable for leaders to grow and keep growing in the various qualities that identify a Christ-like leader.

Formal versus Non-formal Education

Too much time in the past has been wasted on the debate about whether seminaries and Bible schools are more important or better than non-formal training in developing leaders. This has really been a debate about the wrong question. The reality is that all tools of leadership development are needed in every setting possible. Some just work better

in certain contexts than others or achieve different results than others.

A tremendous amount of educational research has been done throughout the secular world as well as some in the Christian world as to methodologies that produce the most results and learning that enables behavioral change. This brief paper is too short to comment on these topics extensively.

What is relatively clear from an overly simplistic glance at this topic is that lecture-based teaching in traditional classrooms can be very useful for transferring vast quantities of subject matter. In addition, sequential learning that results in degrees is extremely useful for motivating the learner to complete the course, for measuring what that individual knows and for record keeping and communicating this area of proficiency to others. Degree programs that are primarily delivered through lecture are certainly useful to achieve some of the critical outcomes related to the field of leadership development with certain audiences.

When growing in areas of character development, discipleship, worldview and modifying core values, however, experiential learning has a great deal to offer. But not all experiential or interactive adult education is created equal. Factors that make this type of learning most effective include a motivated learner

- Who wants and needs to change
- Who gets to try out something new, or apply it in his/her life and work situation
- Who gets feedback on how he/she did when he/she tried
- Who then has the opportunity to make sense of it through seeing results

The leader/learner who has the opportunity to participate in this type of experiential learning has, by far, the greatest chance of actually changing his/her beliefs and behavior. Excellent leadership development must include, but go beyond just acquiring information and include this type of experiential learning.

The Setting or Learning Environment

The learning environment is also an important factor in leadership development. A residential setting can foster deeper learning or it can merely isolate the leader from his/her constituency so long that the leader becomes irrelevant.

Appropriate forms of interactive learning can take place in the seminary classroom just as easily as under a tree. Excellent lectures can transfer knowledge over the Internet, or across a dining room table. The setting can enhance or detract from learning, but in the end it is only one factor to be considered.

What is most important is to begin with the end in mind. Determine which content is most important to achieving the desired outcome with this target audience. Then review possible methods and choose the one(s) that will be most productive in helping the leader to grow toward this goal. Determine the best learning environment available and make good use of it.

Focus on your target audience and offer the most relevant content, using the best methods possible for the outcome desired, in an appropriate setting that encourages learning. When these factors are combined, the Holy Spirit will use them to ensure that Christian leaders will grow toward Christ-likeness—if they are willing.

4. Stewardship in Leadership Development

No one has unlimited resources. For example, even if someone has all of the financial resources in the world, his/her time is inherently limited. Therefore, while a well-rounded array of opportunities for growth is ideal, which of these opportunities should be given the most time, attention and resources? How can we be good stewards of the extremely limited resources we have available? Again, the answers are not simple.

In our survey we asked leaders, “Which of five answers comes the closest to explaining why there is such a shortage of Christ-centered leaders?” Their overwhelming response was:

- So-called “leadership training programs” do not really prepare people to lead in the real world. People have credentials but they can’t lead. (316 out of 786 who answered this question)

A somewhat close second was the answer:

- The current leader won’t allow the new ones to develop. (212 out of 786 who answered this question)

The remote third, fourth and fifth responses were:

- The situations of leaders are so complicated and demanding that there simply aren’t enough multi-talented people to do them. (93)
- People appointing a new director prefer someone who is already the director or president of three or four other ministries to someone who could give them full time but is younger and less known. (92)
- Churches are short of good leaders because they pay so little by comparison to NGOs or secular jobs. (74)

So vast numbers of current leaders surveyed believe that we are doing a poor job of leadership development through our existing programs today! They do not think that low pay, age or complexity of the role are the main problems, though leaders who refuse to encourage younger leader are a contributing factor. Rather our current efforts at leadership development need to change and improve.

This is a serious indictment coming from a wide base of Christian leaders. It should give those of us working in this field of leadership development cause for deep concern. We must do better in the future. We must stop and realize that no one type or opportunity for leadership development should be given all the attention in any setting. Rather we must work to ensure that the widest range possible of the most needed opportunities is made available for leaders in every geographical setting so that they can keep growing toward becoming Christ-like leaders.

Having Christ-like leaders is not a luxury but a necessity. Providing opportunities for leaders to grow is absolutely critical to a healthy, vibrant, transformational and multiplying Church. We must be wiser stewards of the resources that are available, because in many places the very future of the Church is at stake.

Unless we find, make available, promote and multiply the very best in leadership development opportunities throughout the globe, the results will be tragic. The staggering weight of poor leadership will hold back the advance of the gospel. Let us work together toward ensuring that every leader has the opportunity he/she needs to keep growing toward Christ-like leadership.

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