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**THE TOYOTA WAY TO
LEAN LEADERSHIP:
ACHIEVING AND
SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE
THROUGH LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT**

*By Jeffery K. Liker & Gary L. Convis
New York, NY: McGraw-Hill (2012)
Hardcover, 280 pages*

Reviewed by WENDY KEOUGH

Leaders do not become leaders by accident. They develop into great leaders through intentional training, learning, and doing, especially when they are able to look for a fresh perspective as they seek solutions for a new problem. The automotive industry may seem an unlikely source for methods on Christian leadership; yet, having worked in this industry for some time myself, I feel that it is a worthwhile area of study. Relentless change, intense competition, and customer expectations shaped by constant innovation have forced car companies to seek new approaches not only to production, but also to developing the people and leaders who do the producing. Churches have started to notice that, while they are not selling cars, they ignore their changing environment at their own peril.

At first sight, Liker and Convis seem to write only for business leaders. They suggest that by incorporating “the Toyota Way,” organizations can be strengthened, become more profitable, or even come back to life after a crisis. Toyota’s “lean manufacturing” process is well documented, but what are less apparent are the innovative leadership processes behind the success of Toyota. “Toyota is unique for its combination of deep investment in people and its focus on long-term continuous

improvement.” This is something Christian organizations need to learn as well.

Chapters 2-5 of the book guide readers through four key areas of the Toyota Way: Self-development, coaching and developing others, supporting daily *kaizen* (a Japanese business philosophy of continuous improvement), and creating vision and aligning goals. Each of these components is illustrated by recounting actual experiences that show the success of using Toyota leadership at several manufacturing plants in the United States. Chapter 6 even gives a specific example of how using Toyota training revived a dying company. The final chapter gives the reader the tools to use to begin thinking like a Toyota-trained leader.

One of the key concepts in this book is the *gemba*. When companies face a problem, they are encouraged to return to the idea of the *gemba*—where the work is. According to Toyota methods, when there is a problem, you go to the *gemba*. You go to where the work is being done. Who are the experts on the job if it is not the people doing the job? In many cases when Toyota has failed, it has been because they did not go to the *gemba*, but instead let managers make decisions, ignoring the *gemba*. Tied to this concept is the issue of respect for those actually doing the work. Organizational leaders know how easy it is to overlook the expertise of classroom teachers, church deacons, local congregations, or the faithful secretaries who keep the office going when everybody else is gone. *Gemba* reminds us that those who do the work are often the ones with the best idea for fixing a problem.

Another great component of the Toyota Way is *genchi genbutsu*, or “go and see.” If the best people to recognize a problem are those doing

the job, then leaders must be trained to empower their employees, from the workers on the assembly line up through top executives, to identify problems and come up with corrective actions. Should Christian leaders not do the same with their employees?

The Toyota methods of leadership seek to create an environment of responsibility for continuous improvement and accountability. Similarly, Christian leaders are called to strive for Christ-like excellence, not to be satisfied with the status quo. Continuous improvement—whether measured in increasing church membership, student enrollment, funds raised, or employee morale—is a relevant issue even in Christian organizations. Is it too much for Christian leaders to expect the best from those they lead? Accountability, when used properly, is an amazing tool that the leader can use to encourage followers down a path to continuous improvement.

The authors wrap up the book by giving readers clear steps to create a Toyota environment within their company or within themselves. Leaders will find helpful suggestions such as seeking a good *sensei* (a “mentor”), working on what they can control (not only what they wish they could control), and implementing the following concept: “Try. Then reflect. Then try some more.” This mindset of incremental experimentation reveals an attitude of striving to become the best leader one can be. Interestingly, the authors recommend even to leave a company if going somewhere else creates a better fit and a chance to be a better leader. Christian leaders can relate to the concept of fitting gifts and experience to challenges. While God often leads a leader in answer to prayer into specific work contexts, He prepares leaders through their inner

growth journey for ever-more-challenging assignments.

At first, readers may not feel at home when reading about *kaizen*, *genchi genbutsu*, and *gemba*. These are themes that I learned when I entered the work force, and that have formed the leadership style I have today as a Christian leader. I feel blessed that God gave me first-hand experience in this way of thinking early in my career; this has allowed me to translate leadership development principles into an approach that builds ordinary people into extraordinary leaders. That is something I also see in the story of the Master Leader: He transformed 12 commoners into the leaders of an incredible community that still lives on today.

WENDY KEOUGH is a graduate student in the Leadership program at Andrews University, and has been a successful leader in the world of automotive manufacturing.

THE 5 LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP: PROVEN STEPS TO MAXIMIZE YOUR POTENTIAL

By John C. Maxwell
New York, NY: Center Street,
Hachette Book Group (2011)
Paperback, 289 pages

Reviewed by CHRISTIANE E. THEISS

Is leadership a process or a position? Looking at the book’s title, *The 5 Levels of Leadership*, you might think that Maxwell sees leadership as a position. But it does not take him long to underscore that he does see leadership as a process, not as a position (p. 4). So how does he resolve the apparent contradiction? Since leadership situations are never static, but dynamic and changing, leaders also have to