

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

7-2023

The Spiritual Journey of Leadership: A "Growth" Framework

Randy Siebold

Andrews University, rjs@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Siebold, Randy, "The Spiritual Journey of Leadership: A "Growth" Framework" (2023). *Faculty Publications*. 5064.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/5064>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Early in my Christian walk, I found Bible verses that spoke about how God would grant the things I wanted and needed if I asked in faith (e.g., Matt. 21:22; John 15:7). But what I lived seemed to be different.

While at times I had remarkable answers to prayer, sometimes, prayers concerning my desires and even some “needs” did not get answered as I expected. I knew I could not simply ask for a Ferrari, and it would show up the next day. But when I prayed for months and years for a close friend’s son to be healed from a debilitating accident, he was not. Or when I pleaded for a rough edge of my character to be smoothed, it yet again slashed out against those I loved. *What is wrong?* I wondered.

An ongoing path

While my understanding of how God works in my life is far from complete, I have grown in my comprehension. I recognize that my spiritual life has ups and downs. Both are an important part of the refining process. Rather than using God to get what I wanted or even as a recipe to achieve what I thought was important or necessary, I began to understand the Christian walk as a growing relationship of knowing and loving the Creator God and, ultimately, as a journey of discipleship.

Furthermore, I began to recognize that while a “righteous man may fall seven times,” he will also “rise again” (Prov. 24:16, NKJV). Thus, the process of growing in likeness with my Friend and Savior is not completed in a moment. It “is not a work of a day or a year, but of a lifetime.” While it includes falls and victories, without “continual efforts and constant activity, there can be no advancement in the divine life” and thus no actual growth.¹

As in discipleship, so in leadership. Both discipleship and leadership are built on relationships, both require a spirit of collaboration, and both intend to influence others to change or grow. Such similarities reveal an essential truth about leadership.

A journey

Leadership is a spiritual journey. Growth in the spiritual life is foundational to growth as a leader. The journey of discipleship is at the core of the journey of a leader. As growing with God continues throughout our lives, so our growth as leaders should never end. Such realizations have profound implications for both what it means to be a leader and for leadership development.

What it means to be a leader

Before addressing the significance of leadership, it is important first to clarify to whom we are referring. Leaders are often thought of as those holding a “leadership” position. Yet leaders can clearly be found without a formal position. Just watch children at play and observe how they influence one another. Also, consider the earthly life of Jesus. He held no formal position, yet He was the greatest leader the world has ever known. Thus, when we speak of leaders and leadership, our discussion can apply either to those with formal positions (e.g., elder, pastor, conference departmental director, institutional president) or those who lead from a “support” role.

While many definitions exist, in my search to understand leadership better, the following is one of the most complete: *Leadership is a relationship of collaborative influence for change.*² This definition describes leadership as fundamentally about people working together toward a common future goal. Leadership is about supporting people, whether working one-on-one, in teams, or as larger units. It affects the actions, behaviors, and thoughts of others through inspiring, guiding, advising, empowering, and other positive interactions and by using a variety of approaches. Ultimately, leadership is about helping bring about positive change.

Given this definition of leadership, a leader is *one who builds relationships of collaborative influence for change*. Good leaders cultivate an environment that helps people to work together rather than against each other. Even as leaders have their eyes on advancing the organizational mission, they find ways to build and honor people and help them grow. Such an intentional process is often called *leadership development*.

What might such a process look like? What might encourage the kind of ongoing growth God intends for those He summons to lead?

In the Global Leadership Institute at Andrews University (GLI), we have wrestled with those questions. We consulted a wealth of leadership development research, reflected on decades of personal leadership practice, and learned from colleagues and graduate students across the globe. As we searched the inspired record, we were again impressed by the relevance of its principles of growth and development. The approach that emerged from our search we call the leader growth framework.

The leader growth framework

The framework begins with a Christ-centered approach of both personal and professional

Randy J. Siebold, PhD, is codirector of the Global Leadership Institute and director of the Doctor of Leadership program, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

The spiritual journey of leadership: A “growth” framework

growth and culminates in multiplication—that is, helping leaders grow to support the mission of the church—through five important components. The figure illustrates it.



Component 1: Led by Christ. Too often, many have regarded leadership development as a secular process devoid of spiritual content. Ironically, in doing so, we miss the central point: Jesus is the model for leadership and life. He counsels us to come to Him and learn from Him (Matt. 11:28, 29). “Looking unto Jesus we obtain brighter and more distinct views of God, and by beholding we become changed.”¹³ As we make Him the center of our personal development, Christ supports our development as leaders. He is the indispensable core of the leadership journey.

Component 2: Leading self. Accounts of leaders summoned by God to serve His purposes fill the pages of Scripture. In those stories, God shaped leaders for a calling that stretched their abilities and required their trust. Notice the patient preparation of Moses for his leadership with the Israelites. Remember the battle-tested Joshua with his years of training for his taking Israel into the Promised Land. Also, the narratives of David, Elijah, Paul, and others are equally instructive.

Each went through a journey of growth as God sent them forth as leaders. None were without flaws and failures. In fact, it is no accident that the Bible preserves their failures. Life stories are God’s tools to help leaders grow. But few leaders know how to read and learn from them. As a result, they miss a deeper understanding of their identity in Christ.

Consider the life of Jesus. While spending years in the carpenter’s shop, He advanced in understanding God and His own life purpose.⁴ We get a glimpse into Jesus’ story as a 12-year-old

at the annual Passover festival. It was here, as He witnessed the slaughter of the Passover lamb, that Christ came face-to-face with part of His place in the business of His Father.

Personal reflection on our own life story in the light of God’s providences helps us anchor our leadership in God’s purposes. It also sheds light on our blind spots that often interfere with our work without our realizing it. Psalm 139 provides a beautiful example of a prayer of self-reflection. Here David pleads for God to examine his heart. In essence, he cries, “Find my ‘blind spots,’⁵ Lord!”

Component 3: Leading with others. Leading is based on relationships. Working with others in constructive ways is crucial.⁶ As any leader knows, laboring with others individually, in groups, or in teams has both occasions of celebration and times of conflict. Sometimes conflicts arise between a leader and others; at other times, leaders mitigate conflict between individuals. In either case, conflicts can be the stickiest and most difficult challenges that leaders face.

Since groups and teams are such an important part of a leader’s responsibilities, growing competence in this area is important. It involves gaining a deeper understanding and skills for how to relate to people, expanding the ability to listen and communicate well, and the willingness (and humility) to view challenges from the perspective of others.

Component 4: Leading in organizations. Too many would-be leaders have an idealized picture of what it means to be the “top” leader—they see it as a way to seek power, prestige, position, and/or fame. Such motivation is misguided and short-sighted. The reality is closer to sleep-interrupting challenges and sacrificial service. Yet leadership is also where changes happen, and every contribution counts. Even those without a formal leadership position will make an impact in the organization. Thus, building leadership competence in this area is appropriate for all.

Component 5. Leading through multiplication. What is the mark of success for leaders? In answering that question, we must consider the fidelity with which Christian leaders have followed God’s plan for their life, including His call to make disciples, to multiply. For leaders, their investment in others can arguably be their greatest contribution. In his final admonition to Timothy, Paul urged him to make leadership multiplication a priority. “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2, NIV).

Helping emerging leaders to grow has another benefit. As the time-tested saying goes, the best way to learn is to teach. Paul expected his readers to grow “to be teachers” (Heb. 5:12) and continue to learn.

Final thoughts

This leader growth framework used by the Global Leadership Institute outlines a unique approach to leadership formation. It is designed to provide a framework for both leadership and personal growth, organizational growth, and ultimately, mission growth. As the church strives to fulfill its expanding mission in these difficult times, it needs leaders who constantly strive to expand their capacity to lead.⁷

The path of human growth is built through joy and celebration, yet also hardship, struggle, and pain. Jesus called His disciples to share both His cup and His joy. Since maturing as a leader is a spiritual growth journey, let us pray together for God’s leadership in our spiritual walk, continued advancement in leadership, and the leaders of our church. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will

be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples’ ” (John 15: 7, 8, NIV).



- 1 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 325.
- 2 This definition is a modification of one from James Tucker.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 355.
- 4 See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), chapter 9, “Days of Conflict.”
- 5 Amy C. Edmondson and Aaron W. Dimmock, “Don’t Get Blindsided by Your Blind Spots,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 5, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/11/dont-get-blindsided-by-your-blind-spots>.
- 6 See Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10.
- 7 The connection between becoming a more mission-focused church and leadership development is described well in Paul Brantley, Dan Jackson, and Mike Cauley, *Becoming a Mission-Driven Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 11.

Share your thoughts on this article by writing to ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org.

NO TIME TO READ?

NO PROBLEM!

Ministry Magazine Podcast | 🔍

Listen to articles!
On the go. For free.

Subscribe in your podcast app.
Search for 'Ministry Magazine Podcast' or scan the QR code.

ministrymagazine.org/podcast