



Leadership Wisdom from Unlikely Voices
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Introduction

You Lead What You Eat

The Point: LEADERS WHO LEAD FROM THE SAME OLD CONCEPTS MISS THE VALUE OF DIVERSE AND UNIQUE IDEAS THAT CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THEIR LEADERSHIP. SOME OF THE MOST OVERLOOKED OF THESE IDEAS COME FROM THE MOST UNLIKELY OF VOICES.

The Same Ol' Same Ol'

Finally! The long-anticipated restaurant opens. For months you've watched the construction of the building, and at last you swing open the doors. Inside you find scores of people waiting for the same experience for which you've longed. Out of the corner of your eye, you notice a group of people at the salad bar. You've heard this restaurant prides itself on having the largest salad bar in the city. Since a bit of roughage is always good for the system, you make your way to the greens and vegetables. As you near the bar, you're amazed by its size. "The claim must be true; this thing is huge. This is going to be great," you think as you make your way toward the culinary monstrosity.

You grab a plate and turn to dig in. But what you see takes you back a step. Oh, it's true this is the largest salad bar all right. Trouble is there are only five food selections available to you. Rows upon rows of lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, cheese, and ranch dressing line the vast bar. But that's it! Do you like mushrooms? Sorry, not available. How about peppers, onions, nuts, blue cheese, bean sprouts, or carrots? Nope. Lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, cheese, and ranch dressing—hope you like it. You try your best to make creative use of these five ingredients, but to no avail. Before you take your first bite, you feel yourself fall into a rut. Check please.

In the early years of this new century, a similar plight is afoot in the diet of leaders. It's become banal. Rows and rows of books, seminars, and conversations fill the space leaders create to sharpen understanding and skill. To be honest, I didn't think yet

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another book on leadership could be published given the current surplus. But alas I was wrong, and happy to be so. Yet most of the heretofore vast selection of leadership ideas revolves around the same basic concepts—motivation, inspiration, empowerment, ownership, teamwork, and maybe a little self-leadership for the highly enlightened who want to feel in touch. Hope you like these ideas, because that’s about all that’s available. On one level the repetition is understandable and even necessary. The longer people study, write, and converse about a specific discipline, the more certain key ideas will coalesce and dominate the landscape of the exploration. Hence, the constellation of ideas and practices of the last two decades are important, and I don’t discount them. But informational predictability can also cause problems for leaders. Without a few different foods—even just a new spice or two—leaders grow narrow and rigid. Even worse, leaders may begin to believe there is little left to learn, explore, or discuss when it comes to their craft. And that mindset is the beginning of the end. Redundancy of ideas combined with unwillingness to explore the new or unfamiliar creates the syndrome known as the *know-it-all leader*. And if there’s one thing we don’t need, it’s more leaders infected with this syndrome. Peter Senge puts it this way,

Few leaders understand the depth of commitment required to build a learning organization. As Bill O’Brien, a retired CEO, once put it: “This involves the willingness to change our mental models.” This is much easier said than done. In practice, it is disorienting and deeply humbling, because our old mental models were the keys to our confidence and our competence. To be a real learner is to be ignorant and incompetent. Not many top executives may be up for that.¹

When I share this quote in seminars and other settings, I tend to get glazed eyes and confused looks. “*No comprende, Dave.*” Most leaders won’t dismiss outright the idea behind the quote because, well, Peter Senge wrote it. But just try to have a

meaningful dialogue about the practice of this idea with church and/or business leaders and you'll understand what it's like to be in a foreign country where no one speaks your language. At the heart of it: A narrow set of repeated leader ideas—even those delivered with great bravado—will make a Wizard of Oz out of us all—lots of smoke and noise, but not much behind the curtain.

Know-It-All Leaders: From Bad to Worse

Narrow, know-it-all leaders have two deeper problems. First, when leaders grow stale from underexposure to fresh ideas and practices, their leadership resembles a set of techniques to execute as opposed to a dynamic craft to practice. The heart is taken out of the craft and maybe out of the leader, too. In a word, the leader becomes robotic rather than robust. The consequence is obvious: Technique-centered leaders do not know how to lead when situations or persons don't fit the parameters of their techniques. What if situation A doesn't work like the book said it would work? Or, what if person B does something odd for people with person B personalities? In other words, what if life happens and alters, well, everything? Then what? Then the lead-by-numbers leader is in trouble.

It reminds me of a rather embarrassing moment from my early music major days in college. I was asked to play the piano for one of my professors so he could evaluate my keyboard skills. "Can you sight-read music?" he asked. (For non-musicians, the question was aimed at figuring out how well I could read music "on the spot," without any practice). "Well, a little bit," I responded. This was the truth, but it was anemic truth for sure.

"Well just open up that hymnal and play me something," he replied. Now, as a kid, I had memorized the hymn "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus." So, in a casual manner, I located that hymn, placed the hymnal on the piano, and played the song by memory

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while acting as if I were sight-reading it. I should have just said, “No, I can’t sight read.”

When I finished the song, the professor looked at me and said, “Wow, not only can you sight read, but you can transpose [play in a key other than the one written] on sight as well!”

“Um...what?” I asked in a sheepish tone.

“Did you know you played the song in a different key?” he asked, smiling. I winced. Truth is, I hadn’t even looked at the music as I played. It was all done by rote memory and yesterday’s technique.

Leaders often memorize ideas and practices but fail to appreciate how disingenuous those ideas and practices come across when they are delivered with no appreciation for what is right in front of them. When a leader delivers, by memory, a leadership idea or practice with little or no regard for the nuances of the moment, everyone knows it. Authentic leadership goes out the window. This happens when a leader counts too heavily on a few ideas while disregarding the need for further growth, exploration, and development.

The second problem with know-it-all leaders is a cultural phenomenon that extends beyond leaders, though know-it-all leaders seem more susceptible to this woe. Know-it-all leaders have little use for the past or for their predecessors. It’s all about the future. Now this is not all bad. After all, good leaders need to be forward thinkers. As Kouzes and Posner put it, “Leaders need to be proactive in thinking about the future...”² And I agree (with one caveat, which I’ll explain later in this introduction). We should all *Carpe Manaña*, as Len Sweet would say.³

But the domain of the leader and the diet of the leader

are two very different things. An overly futuristic leader's diet can easily overlook the wisdom of predecessors. In the domain of leadership, it's easy to believe that only current information is credible information. Yet, as we've seen in the last decade or so, some of the freshest and most needed insights (for the emerging culture) are ancient in origin. Of course we need fresh voices to blaze new information trails. But we should be careful not to dismiss the wisdom of the past. When we do, we relegate leadership to the surface of cultural change rather than to the domain of human experience that transcends epochs and eras. What is needed is an eye for the future that is hidden in the past. Part of what a leader will need in the years ahead will come as much from recovery as discovery.

What's Needed Now?

At this juncture in leadership thought and practice, we need uncommon lenses to view a domain that has grown too predictable. This book provides just such a view of leadership thought and practice—and that's through *the lens of the Unlikely*. The Unlikely, in this case, are men and women of the past whose lives and messages left an indelible mark on the world. Most would not be required reading for contemporary leadership programs. Nevertheless, they provide us with wisdom for the terrain of 21st-century leadership. These Voices will speak a seasoned wisdom to the familiar and newer leadership concepts emerging in our day. But most of all, they will encourage us to live the gift God has bestowed on us: the gift of humanity.

The fundamental woe of mechanical leaders is their lack of humanity. We “technique” leadership when we don't have the time for the messiness of human encounter and interaction. When our humanity is an interruption in an otherwise happy existence, we've missed the point of life, not to mention the point of leadership. It is our humanity that makes leadership a pain and a privilege. Our

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Unlikely Voices will teach us that leadership is first an expression and response to the nature we often seek to deny.

The Voices you will encounter in this book come from a variety of centuries, cultures, vantage points, theologies, philosophies, and life circumstances. All of the Voices come from people who:

1. Lived in time periods different from ours (although some died more recently than others).
2. Had significant influence in their day.
3. Possessed a timely message for today's leader.

You may find yourself at times wondering why I chose a particular Voice. You may have preconceived ideas about the person or the ideas a particular person champions. But I would encourage you to suspend your judgment and learn from these men and women—even (or perhaps especially) if you do not agree with their ideas.

One of the unfortunate trends still at work in the church is *eradication based on disagreement*. People are ignored or avoided because they do not represent “orthodox” viewpoints. But who made our view (whatever that might be) the orthodox one? We dare not say, “It’s orthodox because the bulk of the faithful have believed it.” (Ever heard of groupthink?) And we really shouldn’t say “because the Bible says so.” Even if that were the role of the Bible (which it isn’t), we really can’t be as bold as to say we’ve got it all correct, can we? It’s time the church jettisons its fascination with one-dimensional thinking and exclusion. We must listen and learn from a variety of voices both inside and outside our tradition.

Back to the Domain of the Leader

One insight these Voices will unlock is the power that resides in the present moment. The emergence that occurs in the present is lost on many leaders because they dislike *what is* and want to focus exclusively on *what could be*. They believe that if they (and/or their teams) attend too directly to the present, it could create an unhealthy satisfaction that just might block future vision and creativity (remember what Kouzes and Posner wrote). And there is some truth to this idea.

Back to the piano for a moment: One of the best pieces of advice I've ever received about sight-reading music came from another college professor. She explained that if I paid too much attention to the measure I was playing, the next measure would sneak up on me, and I'd miss it. "Keep just a little ahead of where you're playing, Dave," she advised. To stay ahead of the moment as a leader and a community has value (the *Carpe* thing), and it is worthy of our attention. However, as a singular idea, it has the potential to create all sorts of problems. It must be balanced by another idea.

The current obsession with tomorrow has created a band of leaders unaware of the damage they've created by misreading the NOW. Further, most leaders don't appreciate that NOW is all they have. The way they lead in the NOW will determine the future, because the future is nothing more than a brief extension of NOW. It is the release of potency into the present that enables the future to emerge.

I have found in my work with leaders that they do not often understand the power of the leadership moment. Loaded up with information from the salad bar, they enter a moment where those ideas could provide help—yet they don't even release the ideas they have because they don't know how to read and enter the moment.

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If, as leaders, we have a lack of respect for the NOW, we will have little ability to release important energy into it. Instead, we will simply plow through the moment trying to get to the future where all the “good stuff” is.

The Unlikely Voices in the forthcoming pages will teach us that since NOW is all we have, it’s critical that we learn to see it for what it is (and for what it could become). We must learn to do more than skim across the top of the moment. The treasures—the “good stuff”—are hidden underneath it all. Leaders today need wisdom that takes them deeper into the moment and beyond surface issues and interactions. All of our Unlikely Voices knew this and will reveal this to us, each in his or her own way.

There is an epidemic of surface leadership that is disinterested in discovering how to mine the potential hidden in the present. In the pages ahead, my aim is to discuss how familiar and new leadership ideas and practices can actually be released in the moment of leadership—the leadership of NOW. Perhaps we could say that information becomes wisdom when its energy is released in the present moment. This is the journey of this book: to help you release leadership wisdom, as supplied by the Unlikely Voices, into the moment *when you are actually leading*. Imagine that!

The release of leader wisdom is like the release of energy that comes from stored nutrients in the body. What’s needed is a way for leaders to store and retrieve this wisdom when the NOW calls for it.

The Unlikely Voices understood how to release divine energy into the NOW, making them the best guides for this journey.

Using This Resource

Because the journey of a leader is grounded in the NOW and is experiential in nature, this book is not meant to stimulate only the mind. Think of this book as your companion as you seek to discover the wisdom of these Voices and the NOW you'll encounter as you read this book in the days ahead. Let these pages help you release the nutrients you need into the leader moments you encounter. And while you might not be able to take the book with you into the moment, you can take the wisdom you find in it. The more you use the book as a reflective tool, the more it can assist you in the NOW that is emerging.

This book features recurring sections that encompass all or some of these elements: **PAUSE**, **PONDER**, and **PRACTICE**. The sections give you immediate ways to work the book into your heart and hands as they allow for space to reflect with the aim of application. The hope is that the combination of ideas and formative space will add new life into your vocation, giving you new ways to release the information in leader moments.

PAUSE: In this section, I want to encourage you to learn the art of centering by inserting a “pause” for the purpose of connecting the heart to the ideas you are reading. It's important to look at ideas with your heart so they can influence the deepest part of you. The more you read (and live) from the heart, the more likely you will lead from that place as well. At times, I will suggest specific ways you might center deeper into the NOW. At other times, I will just leave suggestions out—which means all you need to do is be quiet for a moment before you move to the **PONDER** and **PRACTICE** sections. Either way, don't ignore the **PAUSE** section. If we, as leaders, are missing anything today in our leadership, it's the ability to insert a pause before we influence the NOW. Why pause if you're a know-it-all leader? You already have the answer. The pause section of this book may be the most important piece of this entire experience. I

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encourage you to take it seriously. It just might change your entire view and approach to leadership.

PONDER: This section offers a number of reflective questions that will help you explore how the content intersects with your specific leadership context. Think of it as a built-in journal to help you chronicle this journey.

PRACTICE: This section connects the content with your practice as a leader. It will give you suggestions and ideas for working the content into your specific life and leadership. It will help you find your pulse around the various ideas put forth in the book—revealing strengths and weaknesses in order to stimulate growth and health. Think of this section as a laboratory of sorts where you can experiment with the ideas and principles and learn from that practice.

Make the book, and more importantly, the Unlikely Voices your friends. You will find that your investment will reap an almost immediate return. I give you only a taste of each Unlikely Voice; you may want to get to know them better on your own. These Voices will offer you an incredible array of food that is interesting to taste and, more importantly, is essential for the years ahead. Grab a plate and eat up.

Tying It All Together: TODAY'S LEADER NEEDS FRESH WISDOM THAT CAN RESHAPE THE LEADERSHIP MOMENT AT HAND. TO FIND THIS WISDOM REQUIRES HEALTHY IGNORANCE, UNIQUE AND POTENT IDEAS, AND A WAY TO TRANSLATE IT ALL INTO THE PRESENT MOMENT WHERE LEADERSHIP IS EXPRESSED.