

# It's Who You Are, Not What You Do

By Dyton L. Owen

Every time you turn around, there is a new book or another seminar about leadership. Many of these books and seminars are very good and offer much wisdom and guidance. At other times, however, what is offered focuses on what to do, as if “doing” the stated things would naturally result in leadership being attained.

My contention, however, is that leadership begins and ends not simply with doing the right things, but with who who we are as leaders.

Over the years, I've learned (the hard way) some key elements to leadership by self-definition. And, believe it or not, they have proven themselves time and again. I share some of them below in hopes that others will find them helpful as well.

**1) Leaders must possess a higher tolerance for pain than those being led.** Leadership is not a pain-free undertaking. Going into it with such knowledge might make it easier, but certainly not painless. When the going gets rough, the leader must stand firm, even in the face of opposition. How I respond to the anxiety and chaos around me will, in large part, determine how others in the organization respond. If I react in anger or fear to someone's subversive act, chances are good that others will react in the same way, causing the anxiety to rise even more. But if I respond to that same act of subversion with calm determination, others will tend to respond in kind, knowing that the leadership is unperturbed by anxiety.

Peace and progress are incompatible. Don't think so? The next time you want to change something in your life or work, take an honest assessment of others' opinions. If everyone supports the idea of a particular change, chances are it's not real change, just rearranging the furniture. If you want to make progress, you can bet on there being some painful conflicts and

controversies. It is here that the leader must be able to tolerate the pain better than those being led. She must not give in to the temptation to “go back to Egypt.” He must remain strong in his stance to lead onward and upward in spite of the pain.

**2) Leaders must be flexible and adaptable to an ever-changing environment filled with variables.** It is not “survival of the fittest,” but survival of the most adaptable. Leadership is not about who is stronger or who can out-last the other when anxiety arises. Leadership that is stubborn and unmoving only causes more anxiety in the system, which, in turn, results in more entrenched destructive behavior in others.

**3) Leaders promote change not by their own will, but by their presence.** The sooner leaders accept the fact that they cannot will change, the better. In fact, the more we try to make people change—or accept a change—the more they will resist and revert to old behaviors. The key is to live the change being introduced. That is to say, the more the leader believes in and confidently acts on a suggested change, the more likely the change will come about more smoothly. Granted, there are always some people who will resist any change, embracing instead the seven deadly words of the church: We've never done it that way before. Trying to will those resisters to accept the change will only engrain their resistance more deeply.

**4) Leaders put on their own oxygen masks first.** Often, the first reaction to a crisis is to reach out to others...to relieve their pain or to assist them. When flying, the cabin crew reminds fliers that, should an emergency occur, the oxygen masks will drop from overhead and that we should put our own masks on first before we help anyone around us who may need assistance. Why? Because if we don't

make sure our own needs are sufficiently addressed in a crisis, we won't be much good at making sure others' needs are addressed. In fact, we may do more harm than good. It is best to make sure that in moments of crisis we are grounded, calm and clear-headed before we respond. Otherwise, more damage than good can be done in leading forward.

No system will ever be healthier than its head. It does not matter what the “system” is—family, church, business—if the head or leader is not healthy, the whole system fails. We have seen this time and time again in companies such as Enron, AIG, and even churches. The leaders were not healthy and the whole system suffered or even failed completely.

This is uncomfortable for me because it forces me to accept the fact that if the system I'm leading is not growing or progressing or meeting its vision and goals it may be the result of my own weaknesses or stubbornness.

This lesson means that I, as a leader, must constantly be on my toes, staying in touch with God and keeping my spirit in top-notch shape so that when crisis or anxiety arises I will be better prepared to face it in a non-anxious way and thereby lead others through it. In other words, I don't need to put my own oxygen mask on first when crisis comes; I need to keep the mask on at all times! □



**Dr. Dyton L. Owen** is Senior Pastor of Jetmore United Methodist Church and Hanston United Methodist Church in the Kansas West Conference.