

# **Lead by Example: A Theology and Philosophy of Christian Leadership**

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## **Abstract**

There are several theories regarding effective approaches to leadership. A biblical worldview is compatible with these theories in a number of ways. Developments and sociological shifts have put many of the traditional and core theories of leadership to the test. Nevertheless, several facets of these theories have withstood these difficulties and are still in use in Christian institutions and churches today. A personal theology or philosophy of leadership that is consistent with a biblical worldview must address and integrate leadership philosophies that have maintained historical shifts, in addition to having biblical backing. This article will present a personal leadership philosophy that integrates elements of current leadership theories with a biblical perspective. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate a personal lead by example philosophy of leadership in which modeling transformation and development of self makes one influential and an example worth following.

**KEYWORDS: Christian Leadership, Theology, Philosophy**

## **Introduction**

There are numerous theories about the most effective approach to leadership. There are various aspects of such theories that are consistent with a biblical worldview. Many of the foundational and historical leadership and management theories have faced challenges due to developments and societal changes. Still, there are some aspects of these theories that

have sustained such challenges and are present today in churches and Christian organizations. A personal theology or philosophy of leadership that aligns with a biblical worldview must not only be biblically supported but also address and incorporate the leadership and management ideologies that have sustained historical changes. A personal philosophy of leadership that incorporates aspects of extant leadership theories that align with a biblical worldview will be provided. This article will demonstrate a personal lead by example philosophy of leadership in which modeling transformation and development of self makes one influential and an example worth following.

The first section of this article will establish a biblical and theological foundation for the proposed personal leadership philosophy. This section will provide Scriptures that support and are relevant to the aspects of the personal leadership philosophy put forward. The next section will discuss and summarize several leadership theories and authors that influence this writer's personal leadership philosophy. This section will establish the theoretical foundation upon which this personal philosophy of leadership garners its support. The third section will put forward a personal theology and philosophy of leadership, incorporating the relevant insight from extant theories and relevant biblical influence. The final section will discuss the implications and potential integration of this personal philosophy of leadership for ministry leadership.

### **Biblical and Theological Foundations of Leadership and Management**

the idea that the Bible is not prescriptive and explicit on there being an authorized leadership philosophy, nevertheless, it nevertheless provides many Scriptures and principles that guide those who lead in a Christian context. First Corinthians 11:1 says, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (NIV). Christians, and arguably all people, have been

assigned the role of followers in one way or another. All Christians, whether called or operating in some type of leadership role, are to be first followers of Christ. “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ,” alludes to the prerequisite that Christian leaders must first be followers of Christ in order for others to follow their example. This idea of followership is entirely biblically supported and promoted. Jesus Christ calls all people into a relationship by following Him, just as He did with His initial disciples. John 12:26 says, “If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor” (NKJV). Followership is mentioned over twenty times in the Gospels. An example is found in Matthew, which says,

*And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. <sup>19</sup>And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. <sup>20</sup>And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. Matthew 4:18-20 (KJV).*

By being a good follower of Christ, Christian leaders become good examples of followership, amongst other qualities. Jesus Christ is the perfect example for Christians to live out this life and is the quintessential model for leadership. Christ taught His disciples that to become the greatest, you must be a servant. Matthew says,

*But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; <sup>27</sup>And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: <sup>28</sup>Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. Matthew 20:26-28 (KJV).*

Supporting Paul’s principle, follow me as I follow Christ, Jesus Christ exemplified as He taught His disciples to be examples for the kingdom of God. John says,

*Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. <sup>14</sup>If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. John 13:13-15 (KJV).*

The first two biblical principles, followership and being an example for others to follow, are closely linked with the final element, and that is the transformation of self and personal development. For a leader to be a good leader and be an example worth following, they must have personal development. For Christians, personal development begins with the transformation of one's life to be more Christlike and the development into leaders who are more Christlike. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (KJV). This is the new starting disposition of Christian leaders; they are new creations in Christ. Subsequent and continual transformation and development mean that Christians grow and mature in becoming more Christlike and effective Christian leaders. Romans 12:2 says, "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (KJV). In that same vein, 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (NKJV). These leaders continue the process of transformation and development first in their own lives, and then begin to impact the lives of others in their family, church, and sphere of influence.

## **Theoretical Foundations of Leadership and Management**

The lead by example concept is not new, as demonstrated, it can be traced back to biblical origins in the first-century church and arguably much earlier than that. The lead by example leadership ideology has gained popularity in recent years (Qiu et al., 2018). The lead by example ideology has become a major focus of many scholarly writings in the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century. “Based on the effort to abstract the concept of leadership from confounding power and intuitional factors, the vital role of leading by example is well recognized in existing scholarship (Hermalin, 1998; Fehr and Gächter, 2000; Drouvelis and Nosenzo, 2013; Dannenberg, 2015)” (Qiu et al., 2018). Lead by example means what it says, leaders exemplify the behavior or outcomes they want to see in others’ lives. Kouzes & Posner (2017) explain,

It's about doing what you say, practicing what you preach, following through on commitments, keeping promises, and walking the talk. Being an exemplary leader requires you to live the values. You have to put into action what you and others stand for. You have to be the example for others to follow. And, because you're leading a group of people—not just leading yourself—you also have to make sure that the actions of your constituents are consistent with the shared values of the organization (p. 72).

Many of these scholars wrote on the positive impact of the lead by example leadership ideology. Qiu et al. (2018) write,

It is found that leading by example has positive effects on the cooperation of followers on both the group level and the individual level.... Our findings suggest that both leading by example and personal traits significantly influence cooperation but on different levels” (p. unknown).

This personal leadership philosophy does not emphasize the trait theory in leadership because of the more advantageous position of leadership development, which qualifies almost anyone, not just those with stellar traits. Northouse (2016) notes that Stogdill's study found that individuals do not become leaders only because those leaders exhibit some particular traits; rather, traits should be appropriate based on leadership situations. Since there are only a few biblical examples of leaders who possessed common particular leadership traits, it can be argued that traits are not a determining qualifier in becoming a Christian leader.

Connected to the lead by example ideology is the notion of followership. There is a leadership philosophy that says good leaders must have great followers and great followers can make good leaders (Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008). Northouse (2016) explains, "a serendipitous outcome of being a follower is that in the process of following, you learn about leading. Followership allows individuals to view leadership from a position unencumbered from the burdens and responsibilities of being the leader (p. 309). Very often, when discussing the topic of leadership and followership, leadership is highly regarded and takes center stage.

But if you define leadership as the mobilization of followers who then become leaders of the original leaders, and if you measure these mobilizations by the harsh tests of moral and ethical values, you begin to understand the complex processes of leadership" (Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008).

The transformation of self as described in this personal philosophy of leadership is not what Northouse (2016) describes as pseudotransformational leadership because it is not focused on passing self-interest onto followers rather being an example

of leadership for God or the greater good. Charismatic leaders and authentic transformational leadership are distinguished from pseudotransformational leaders based on the notion that socialized leadership desires a positive impact for the greater good (Northouse, 2016). Northouse (2016) describes charismatic leaders who resemble this ideology of transformation of self, "in addition to displaying certain personality characteristics, charismatic leaders demonstrate specific types of behaviors. First, they are strong role models for the beliefs and values they want their followers to adopt" (p. 166). Kouzes & Posner (2017) support this idea, "Becoming the best leader you can be means becoming the best self you can be. Therefore, leadership development is fundamentally self-development" (p. 308).

### **Personal Theology and Philosophy Description**

The personal theology and philosophy align with the lead by example ideology. Lead by example is a concept that, as previously established, is biblically consistent and promoted. This personal philosophy begins with leaders solidifying a relationship with Jesus Christ, then becoming transformed into the image of Christ, and becoming an example of Christlikeness that is worthy to be followed. This philosophy can be understood in terms of a three-phased perpetual process: (1) Followership, (2) Transformation/development of self, and (3) Example Leader.

First, in this personal philosophy, followership is a disposition whereby people yield their actions to the influence of another, the leader, for a collective positive outcome. Kelley (2008) explains, "followers are reconceived as being active, intelligent, responsible, and involved in interests shared with the leader (see also Chaleff, 1998; Hollander, 1992), although some followers choose to assume a more passive or negative role within a group" (p. 10).

Secondly, the transformation and development of oneself are paramount for new leaders. Mumford et al. (2000) explain, “leaders, no matter how gifted, initially enter organizations as novices. Thus, they lack basic concepts that provide them with an understanding of the work, organizational contexts, and leadership roles” (p. 4). This is certainly true in the church and Christianity, where new Christians are born again and go through a transformation and renewal process. “Transformational leadership is concerned with improving the performance of followers and developing followers to their fullest potential (Avolio, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1990a)” (Northouse, 2016). Leaders must begin to develop, grow, mature, and gain experience to become more effective. The transformation of followers or an organization begins much earlier with the personal transformation of the leader. Northouse (2016) explains, “People who exhibit transformational leadership often have a strong set of internal values and ideals, and they are effective at motivating followers to act in ways that support the greater good rather than their own self-interest (Kuhnert, 1994)” (p. 169). Mumford et al. (2000) allude to an acclimation or development technique for new leaders, “assignments where the leader has primary supervisory responsibilities and some limited discretion are likely to prove valuable in skill development.”

Finally, this personal philosophy’s third element is the “example leader.” The “example leader” closely follows the model of their leader, adhering to core principles. This translates into what Jacobs (2018) describes, “Exemplary leaders influence subordinate commitment by setting an example of exemplary behavior in day-to-day interactions—especially in dangerous, unpleasant, or controversial situations” (p. unknown). “Example leaders” communicate vision, motivate, influence, and help to develop followers into being more effective and potential future leaders themselves. Bennis (2007) describes six competencies of exemplary leaders, “they create a sense of mission, they motivate others to join them on that mission, they create an adaptive social architecture for their followers, they

generate trust and optimism, they develop other leaders, and they get results.” In Christianity, this will serve a perpetual process of followers, transforming, and becoming “example leaders”, who generate new followers who will eventually become leaders.

### **Implications for Ministry Leadership**

This personal philosophy of leadership makes several glaring implications for a ministry leadership context. Being an “example leader” sets out the expectation for those in leadership. An example leader models the behaviors and actions that they desire for followers to follow. First Timothy 4:12 says, “Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (NKJV). This Scripture indicates that believers should be an example to others, and this applies to leaders as well as those new in the faith. Being an example includes being an example of good followership. This demonstrates the close link between followership and being an example in the new and formative periods of one’s leadership development. Zaleznik (1965) argues, “Juniors must avail themselves of opportunities to learn from assessing consequences so that, as they mature and assume increasing responsibilities, their response to pressures will be seasoned by judgment and experience” (p. 120). This statement applies in a ministry context and implies that new believers and new church leaders must take opportunities to learn and grow under seasoned leaders so they will be better equipped to assume more leadership responsibilities. This insight makes the connection between followership and the next implication on development.

Another implication is that leaders should be open to transformation and development. They should avail themselves of opportunities to grow and become more effective. This certainly applies to new leaders and, in the case of a ministry context, new converts. First Timothy 3:6 says, “A church leader must not be a new believer, because he might become proud, and the

devil would cause him to fall” (NLT). This Scripture indicates that there is a growth and development process that Christians go through after becoming believers to be effective leaders. Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman (2000) explain, “leadership can be framed not in terms of specific behaviors, but instead in terms of the capabilities, knowledge, and skills that make effective leadership possible’ (p. 12). This is consistent with the skills theory of leadership, but as that theory applies in this context, it adds that leaders can develop the necessary skills to be effective leaders. Northouse (2016) elaborates, “In the skills approach we shift our thinking from a focus on personality characteristics, which are viewed as innate and largely fixed, to an emphasis on skills and abilities that can be learned and developed” (p. 43). Opening up, leading to the development of necessary skills and qualities to lead, creates an opportunity for anyone to be a leader. This should be the disposition of all Christians to have the opportunity to be leaders by position and certainly leaders in their own respect i.e., self-leadership, family leadership, or leadership in their sphere of influence.

## **Conclusion**

The personal leadership philosophy discussed put forward a lead by example leadership ideology based on biblical principles and aspects of extant leadership theories. The foundation of this personal leadership theology is based on 1 Corinthians 11:1, which says, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (NIV). There is a two-fold implication for this Scripture as it applies to this personal leadership theology. First, followership and secondly, be a good example. These two elements (followership, example leader), along with self-development/ transformation, make up the three elements of this personal leadership philosophy. There is a wealth of Scriptures on followership supporting the idea for all Christians to be good followers of Christ and other leaders. Christians must be an example of good followers who can be deemed leaders in their own right and develop into leaders in the

church. This leads to the element of development/transformation, which bridges the first two, facilitating good followers to develop into good “example leaders”. Extant writings on the lead by example ideology, transformational leadership theory, skills leadership theory, and followership theory help shape this personal philosophy. This personal leadership theology appropriately applies and has implications for ministry leaders because it is based on a biblical foundation. Followers of Christ are to be great examples of followers who, through transformation, develop and become “example leaders”. “Example leaders” model the way. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, KJV).

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