

Unleashing the Power of Rubber Bands

Lessons in Non-Linear Leadership

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

Introduction

I love great leadership. I love it when I'm able to observe it, love it when I'm the recipient of it, love it when I'm able to do it. Great leadership takes my breath away, and I have seen it in some of the most surprising places.

It is often spotlighted in large corporations, but I have seen it in a rural McDonald's, a library, a veterinary office, and a small church. I've seen it in a waitress, a salesclerk, and a bus driver. I've seen it in an accounting group, a public high school, and a nursing home. I've even seen it at the DMV, but only once.

Great leadership is occurring in the hands of quiet and unnoticed people who are creating environments where people can bring the best of what they do to what they do best. But you will never see these inspiring leaders on the cover of a magazine or in the six o'clock news.

We greatly underestimate where great leadership is to be found and what we can learn from it. If we only expect to find it in the hands of those select few in positions of obvious power, we are poorer for having overlooked the beauty and strength that's to be found in unexpected places.

Most leaders want to lead in strong and admirable ways, even if what they lead is never the biggest or the best. And most leaders who do it well find ways to develop strong leadership at every level in the organization. They know how to unleash the power that is already in the organization and how to fan the flame of that power in productive and transformational ways.

My hope is that in this book you will find a simplicity and practicality that inspires hope, and come away with a sense that *you* can do leadership better as a result. And by practicality, I don't always mean a clear, step-by-step plan. While that is important, I believe that if plans precede the "why," they nearly always result in less-than-optimal performance. I hope that this book provokes, stimulates, irritates, and ignites you to better leadership. Great leadership is much more about creating a culture, and cultures transform people in much more profound ways than systems do. Systems and processes should always support the vision, but they should never *be* the vision. When you spend time plumbing the depths of "why," you will then be free to formulate the "how," and you will see that there are many great ways to tackle that "how."

I also want to show how closely leadership is tied to both character and to God, because I think the leader ought to be the most transformed person in the organization. A leader works with everyone, sets the tone for an organization, and creates a culture in the office. If you are reading this book and are not a Christ-follower, I guess you could just substitute "higher power" for God, but I would invite you at least once or twice to consider how deeply great leadership is tied to the nature of God.

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Much of what gets done in leadership has a strikingly non-linear approach. There is no clear-cut, step-by-step equation that guarantees results; it's the convergence of conditions that creates a climate where people and organizations prosper. I'm guessing since you opened this book after reading the title, you are not looking for a book that presents a linear approach to leadership. But just in case that *is* what you are looking for, I recommend you put this one down and keep looking.

I have read many linear books on leadership, some of which have been enormously helpful. This book is not one of those linear books. Some of my best friends think in that sequential, ordered way, and do great leadership from that perspective. I have even hired, worked with, and benefited greatly from them.

But that is not how my mind works.

Which brings me to the Post-it note.

The first year I led Axis, I was sitting at my desk one morning before the rest of my staff arrived and the meetings and flurry of activities began. On the corkboard that hung above my desk were pictures of my kids, a copy of our vision statement, a strategy spreadsheet (created by some of the friends mentioned above), and a postcard of Bora-Bora.

I really liked our vision statement, and our strategy was well thought out. I had little doubt that if we continued to pray and execute against the strategy, we would make significant progress toward the vision. Everything in that sentence is just what a leader is looking for. But for me, something was missing. Turns out it was just a word, but a word that encompassed everything.

So I pulled out a Post-it and wrote the word *Flourish*. Then I stuck that Post-it up on my corkboard, where it stayed for the next five years. Perhaps it was my own personal vision statement—or vision word, I guess. But whenever I looked at that word, I knew what to do.

I guess we all need different things. Some people need a spreadsheet or a detailed plan to know what to do. I needed a word. That word, hung where I could see it every day, went with me in my heart and head and spirit into each meeting, each interaction with people, each conversation I had with myself.

It motivated me to lead well, to build a culture where people and programs and systems could flourish. For me, *flourish* is a very powerful, visceral, and prompting word.

We all have certain conditions under which we flourish. The coastal hills near our house are lush green right now, bursting with the color of wildflowers. They are so beautiful that driving is dangerous: you can barely take your eyes off of them. The perfect combination of spring rain and sunshine has created this spectacular sight.

There is no exact equation for these conditions, no spreadsheet that monitors and quantifies the correct mixture of rain and sun. People and organizations are no different. Given certain cultural climates, they will grow and accomplish and learn and flourish.

Which leads me to the rubber bands . . .

Rubber Bands

At its heart, leadership is about promises, and of all its promises, development is one of the most significant. Sometimes in our attempts to take this seriously, we put together very cumbersome developmental plans. Perhaps it's better than the popular alternative of completely ignoring the issue, but I wonder if we make it too complicated.

One day I was in a meeting of senior leaders at Willow Creek, and Greg Hawkins was talking very excitedly. Which, come to think of it, is the only way I have ever heard Greg talk. . . . Anyway, he was talking about this topic of development and he pulled a thick rubber band out of his pocket. He stretched it between his two hands and said, "Very simply"—Greg is a genius when it comes to making complex issues simple, and therefore, doable—"this is development."

He showed what happened when he moved his hands too far away from each other: The rubber band became taut and clearly in danger of breaking. Stretched too far for too long, the rubber band is ruined.

Then he moved his hands closer together until the rubber band became slack, not at all capable of doing what we hire rubber bands to do. Completely incapable of acting like a decent rubber band.

Inherent in the leadership relationship is the expectation that over time, the direction you give will result in progress toward maturity, growth in skills and character, and even an increase in your own leadership competencies.

I think it is a helpful and good discipline to write out a simple developmental plan for the people you lead. And once that plan is written, the best way to implement it is to think of those people as rubber bands. When I was nineteen years old, I'm pretty sure Jamie Barr thought a lot about rubber bands when he thought about me.

Jamie was the high school pastor at my church in Whittier, California. He had spent years as a researcher at the City of Hope National Medical Center before he heard the whisper of the Holy Spirit calling him to seminary. With a heart for high school kids, he eventually landed in the role of youth pastor at the church I was attending. I was a freshman at a nearby college that required a certain number of ministry hours a month, and Jamie's area seemed as good as any.

Over the next five years, Jamie Barr became the first developmental leader in my life. He stretched me and challenged me, he supported and encouraged me, he believed in me and gave me things to do—things that mattered.

Jamie was the first person who ever uttered the words *Nancy*, *leader*, and *teacher* in the same sentence. Do you understand the power of naming someone's giftedness? The moment and memory of that has propelled me down some of the most significant paths in my life. Those words meant so much because they came from a leader who was stretching me and taking me places for which I had no map.

My most vivid recollections of those years with Jamie include conversations we had directly following either a success or a failure. After I had done something well, he would tell me about it. He would replay the details of what I had done, share his observations regarding it, and talk about the impact my actions had had on the high school kids. Then he would always say something like, "Okay, now get over it"—just in case I was tempted to linger a bit too long in the glory of the win. He kept my head on straight with that comment. I was nineteen, and if someone isn't helping you keep your head on straight at that age, there isn't much hope.

Whenever I did something that didn't fit into the "success" category—when my teaching didn't "click" or I was too glib (I think that only happened once. I am tempted to include one of those smiley faces here, but I don't like them.), or when I made a poor decision or did something that was in my own best interest rather than that of the kids, Jamie would say something like "So if you had that to do over again, what would you do differently?"

How graciously directive! I wasn't going to get a chance to do it over again, but I *was* going to have a chance to learn from my mistakes and grow enough so that when the next opportunity came I might make a better choice.

So much hope was implied in that tiny question, and the way he worded it helped me to save face a bit. It spared me the crushing things that *could* have been said: "You idiot! How could you possibly do something *that* stupid?" And believe me, there were times when that would have been the best response. It also spared me from the painful illusions that I didn't need improvement or that problems should be avoided. And it built within me a foundation of strength for the times when I would fail again.

Jamie gave me hope because he intimated that there would be a next time; this mistake, while still a mistake, had not rendered me completely unqualified for another chance.

And there was hope in the fact that it was a collaborative question. Jamie allowed me to engage in a conversation about what I could learn and how I could be shaped by that learning. The very best development that a leader can offer engages someone else in the dialogue of learning.

And so Jamie Barr grew me up. As a leader, as a teacher, as a follower of Christ. He gave me opportunities, challenges, and a relationship—three things that form a powerful crucible of development. He stretched me sometimes to the point of pain, but never to the point of breaking. He cared for me genuinely, of that I was never in doubt.

And I never once saw him take out a written plan. I think Jamie may have had rubber bands on his mind.