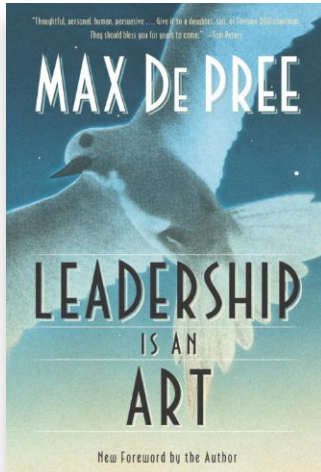


# EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Leadership is an Art

### THE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

You can start this book anywhere. It is more a book of ideas than practices. It is not what most people would describe as a management book on how to get things done – through the beliefs expressed here may help you do some extremely important things. The book is about the art of leadership: liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible.

The ideas, beliefs and principles in the book apply to nearly all group activities. Healthy relationships of different kinds can be built in almost any organization. Leadership is an art, something to be learned over time. Leadership is more tribal than scientific, more a weaving of relationships than an amassing of information.

### The Millwright Died

In addition to all of the goals and parameters and bottom lines, it is fundamental that leaders endorse a concept of persons. This begins with an understanding of the diversity of people's gifts and talents and skills.

Understanding and accepting diversity enables us to see that each of us is needed. It also enables us to begin to think about being abandoned to the strengths of others, of admitting that we cannot know or do everything.

# Leadership is an Art

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The simple act of recognizing diversity in corporate life helps us to connect the great variety of gifts that people bring to the work and service of the organization. Diversity allows each of us to contribute in a special way, to make our special gift a part of the corporate effort.

Recognizing diversity helps us to understand the need we have for opportunity, equity, and identity in the work place. Recognizing diversity gives us the chance to provide meaning, fulfillment, and purpose, which are not to be relegated solely to private life any more than are such things as love, beauty, and joy. It also helps us to understand the difference between goals and rewards.

In the end, diversity is not only real in our corporate groups but it frequently goes unrecognized. When we think about leaders and the variety of gifts people bring to corporations and institutions, we see that the art of leadership lies in polishing and liberating and enabling those gifts.

## **What is Leadership?**

The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader.

Leaders should leave behind them assets and a legacy. Leaders must deliver to their organizations the appropriate services, products, tools, and equipment that people in the organization need in order to be accountable. But what else do leaders owe? What are artful leaders responsible for?

Surely we need to include people. People are the heart and spirit of all that counts. Without people, there is no need for leaders. Leaders can decide to be primarily concerned with leaving assets to their institutional heirs or they can go beyond that and capitalize on the opportunity to leave a legacy, a legacy that takes into account the more difficult qualitative side of life, one which provides greater meaning, more challenge, and more joy in the lives of those whom leaders enable.

Leaders are obligated to provide and maintain momentum. Momentum comes from clear vision of what the corporation ought to be, from a well-thought-out strategy to achieve that vision, and from carefully conceived and communicated directions and plans that enable everyone to participate and be publicly accountable in achieving those plans.

Leaders are also responsible for effectiveness. Leaders can delegate efficiency, but they must deal personally with effectiveness. How is that done? Effectiveness comes about through enabling others to reach their potential – both their personal potential and their corporate or institutional potential.

In a day when so much energy seems to be spent on maintenance and manuals, on bureaucracy and meaningless quantification, to be a leader is to enjoy the special privileges of complexity, of ambiguity, of diversity. But to be a leader means, especially, having the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those who permit leaders to lead.

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## Participative Premises

I believe that the most effective contemporary management process is participative management. Participative management arises out of the heart and out of a personal philosophy about people. It cannot be added to, or subtracted from, a corporate policy manual as though it were one more managerial tool.

Everyone has the right and the duty to influence decision-making and to understand the results. Participative management guarantees that decisions will not be arbitrary, secret, or closed to questioning. Participative management is not democratic. Having a say differs from having a vote.

Effective influencing and understanding spring largely from healthy relationships among members of the group. Leaders need to foster environments and work processes within which people can develop high-quality relationships – relationships with each other, relationships with the group with which we work, relationships with our clients and customers.

How does one approach the problem of turning the ideals about relationships into reality? I would propose five steps:

*Respect people.* Everyone comes with certain gifts – but not the same gifts. True participation and enlightened leadership allow these gifts to be expressed in different ways and at different times.

*Understand that what we believe precedes policy and practice.* Here I am talking about both our corporate and personal value systems. It seems to me that our value systems and worldview should be as closely integrated into our work lives as they are integrated into our lives with our families, our churches, and our other activities and groups.

*Agree on the rights of work.* Each of us, no matter what our rank in the hierarchy may be, has the same rights: to be needed, to be involved, to have a covenantal relationship, to understand the corporation, to affect our destiny, to be accountable, to appeal, to make a commitment.

*Understand the respective role and relationship of contractual agreements and covenants.* Covenantal relationships enable corporations and institutions to be hospitable to the unusual person and to unusual ideas. Covenantal relationships enable participation to be practiced and inclusive groups to be formed.

*Understanding that relationships count more than structure.* Structures do not have anything to do with trust. People build trust.

Finally, one question: Would you rather work as a part of an outstanding group or be a part of a group of outstanding individuals? This may be the key question in thinking about the premises behind participation.

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## Theory Fastball

For many of us who work, there exists an exasperating discontinuity between how we see ourselves as persons and how we see ourselves as workers. We need to eliminate that sense of discontinuity and to restore a sense of coherence in our lives.

In almost every group nearly everybody at different times and in different ways plays two roles: One is creator, and the other is implementer. This key relationship is often underestimated and mistakenly cast in the light of “boss” and “subordinate.” Hierarchy is inappropriate here. Oftentimes, implementing has to be as creative as the creative act to which it is responding. This is the point at which management and leadership find things most difficult in being open to the influence of others.

In baseball and business, the needs of the team are best met when we meet the needs of the individual persons. By conceiving a vision and pursuing it together, we can solve our problem of effectiveness and productivity, and we may at the same time fundamentally alter the concept of work.

Any concept of work rises from an understanding of the relationship between pitchers and catchers. The following list of rights is for pitchers and catchers alike. These rights are essential if there is to be a new concept of work. It is not a complete list of rights, of course, but these eight are essential.

1. *The Right to be Needed.* Can I use my gifts? In the long run, this most effectively meets the group need. The right to be needed, of course, includes a meaningful personal relationship to the group's goals.
2. *The Right to be Involved.* Involvement needs to be structured, and includes the privileges of problem ownership and risk. It has a minimum of three elements. While simple in theory, these are difficult to put in place. We need a system of input, we need a system of response, and we need to take action. This matter of involvement is not to be taken lightly. The process of involvement can cost dearly. The price is that leaders must be genuinely open to the influence of others.
3. *The Right to a Covenantal Relationship.* Covenantal relationships fill deep needs, enable work to have meaning and to be fulfilling. They make possible relationships that can manage conflict and change. True covenants, however, are risky because they require us to be abandoned to the talents and skills of others, and therefore to be vulnerable. The same risks as one has when falling in love. If you wonder whether this whole idea has a place in corporate life, please ask your nearest poet or philosopher.
4. *The Right to Understand.* Together, we need to understand our mission. We have the right to understand the strategy, and the direction of the group. Essential to good understanding is that leaders clarify the responsibility of each member of the group. These and other elements of the right to understand obligate leaders to communicate, to educate, and to evaluate.

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5. *The Right to Affect One's Own Destiny.* Few elements in the work process are as important to personal dignity as the opportunity to influence one's own future. The process of performance evaluation, promotion, and transfer should always take place with the person's involvement.
6. *The Right to Be Accountable.* To be accountable, we need to have the opportunity to contribute to the group's goals. We need the opportunity to share in the ownership of the group's problems and also the inherent risk. We need to have our contributions measured according to previously understood and accepted standards of performance, and this transaction needs to take place in an adult-to-adult relationship.
7. *The Right to Appeal.* We need to build into our group structures a nonthreatening avenue of appeal. The purpose of this is to ensure against any arbitrary leadership that may threaten any of a person's rights we have been discussing.
8. *The Right to Make a Commitment.* To make a commitment, an employee should be able to answer, "yes" to the following question: Is this a place where they will let me do my best? How can leaders expect a commitment from the people they lead, if those people feel thwarted and hindered? And believe me, there are many obstacles constructed by unthinking leaders.

These are some of my ground rules for working. If any one of us is to catch someone's fastball, there must be a mitt. The rights of work make a sort of mitt.

## **Roving Leadership**

In many organizations there are two kinds of leaders – both hierarchical leaders and roving leaders. In special situations, the hierarchical leader is obligated to identify the roving leader, then to support and follow him or her, and also to exhibit the grace that enables the roving leader to lead. (Roving leadership can be defined as leadership that is exercised on an ad hoc basis by people who have no official title that gives them the right to lead).

It's not easy to let someone else take the lead. To do this demands a special openness and the ability to recognize what is best for the organization and how best to respond to a given issue. Roving leadership is an issue-oriented idea. Roving leadership is the expression of the ability of hierarchical leaders to permit others to share ownership of problems – in effect, to take possession of a situation.

When roving leadership is practiced, it makes demands on each of us – whether we're a hierarchical leader, a roving leader, or a good follower. It's a demanding process. It demands that we be enablers of each other. Roving leadership demands a great deal of trust and a clear sense of our interdependence. Leadership is never handled carelessly – we share it, but we don't give it away. Roving leadership also demands discipline. Interestingly, though in organizations like ours we need a lot of freedom, there's no room for license. Discipline is what it takes to do the job.

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The condition of our hearts, the openness of our attitudes, the quality of our competence, the fidelity of our experience – these give vitality to the work experience and meaning to life. These are what it takes to make roving leadership possible. And roving leadership, freely and openly practiced together, is the vehicle we can use to reach our potential.

## **Intimacy**

Intimacy is at the heart of competence. It has to do with understanding, with believing, and with practices. It has to do with the relationship to one's work.

Those of you who have had real experience with machinery and equipment and even buildings know that they have personalities of their own. Intimacy with our job leads one to understand that when training people to do a job, one needs to teach not only the skill of the job but the art of it as well. And the art of it always has to do with the personality of both the operator and the machine. Intimacy is the experience of ownership. This often arises out of difficulty or questions or exasperation, or even survival.

Intimacy with our work directly affects our accountability and results in personal authenticity in the work process. A key component of intimacy is passion. You should not think that you could come to intimacy easily or by following a formula. Nor is intimacy easily preserved. It has its enemies. In our group activities, intimacy is betrayed by such things as politics, short-term measurements, arrogance, superficiality, and an orientation toward self rather than toward the good of the group.

Intimacy rises from translating personal and corporate values into daily work practices, from searching for knowledge and wisdom and justice. Above all, intimacy rises from, and gives rise to, strong relationships. Intimacy is one way of describing the relationship we all desire with work.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of relationships in industry. The first and most easily understood is the contractual relationship. The contractual relationship covers the quid pro quo of working together. Three of the key elements in the art of working together are how to deal with change, how to deal with conflict, and how to reach our potential. A legal contract almost always breaks down under the inevitable duress of conflict and change. A contract has nothing to do with reaching our potential.

Covenantal relationships, on the other hand, induce freedom, not paralysis. A covenantal relationship rests on shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals, and to management processes. I am convinced that the best management process for today's environment is participative management based on covenantal relationships. Look for the "good goods" of quality relationships that prevail in a corporation as you seek to serve.

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## Whither Capitalism?

One of the great problems of the capitalist system during its first couple of hundred years is that it has been primarily an exclusive system. It has been built primarily around contractual relationships, and it has excluded too many people from both its process and a generally equitable distribution of results. The issue is much more than financial reward: Most people never get the opportunity to be meaningfully involved in the working of the system.

I do not know of a better system, but the capitalist system can be improved, both in practice and in theory, with the influence of an inclusive perspective. A belief that every person brings an offering to the group requires us to include as many people as possible. Including people, if we believe in the intrinsic value of their diversity, will be the only path open to us.

How can we begin to make capitalism an inclusive process? Well, there are a number of ways. First of all, by acknowledging both a Christian and a humanistic concept of people. Each of us is needed. Each of us has a gift to bring. Each of us is a social being and our institutions are social units. Each of us has a deep-seated desire to contribute.

Second, the inclusive approach makes me think of a corporation or business or institution as a place of fulfilled potential. For me it helps to think about the concept of a place of fulfilled potential by thinking about some gifts that leaders owe. Leadership is a condition of indebtedness.

Finally, here is a third way to understand and define an inclusive approach. Inclusive capitalism requires something from everyone. People must respond actively to inclusiveness. Naturally, there is a cost to belonging.

## Giant Tales

What is a giant? Well, giants are many things. People like you and me may become giants.

Giants see opportunity where others see trouble. Giants give the gift of space, space in both the personal and the corporate sense, space to be what one can be. Giants catch fastballs. Now a fastball may be enough for a pitcher, but it is never enough for a team. Corporations and people can throw good ideas around as often as they want. Without giant catchers, those ideas may eventually disappear. Giants have special gifts. Giants also enable others to express their own gifts.

There are at least two things we learn about corporations from the tales of giants. The first is that while productivity is important, giving space to giants is much more important. The second is that giving space to giants lets them and others practice the "roving leadership" I discussed earlier. These two lessons may, from time to time, be hard on the hierarchical leadership. But if you want a corporation to be truly effective, you will need to help corporations be open to giants at all levels.

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## **Tribal Storytelling**

Every family, every college, every corporation, every institution needs tribal storytellers. The penalty of failing to listen is to lose one's history, one's context, and one's binding values. Without the continuity brought by custom, any group of people will begin to forget who they are.

Shared ideals, shared values, shared goals, shared respect, a sense of integrity, a sense of quality, a sense of advocacy, a sense of caring – these are the basis of a covenant and value system. Our system of values cannot be generic. It must be explicit. The system and the covenant around it make it possible for us to work together, not perfectly to be sure, but nevertheless in a way that enables us to have the potential to be a gift to the spirit.

Yet a system of beliefs is always threatened by change, and change is something no one can avoid. Successful entrepreneurs tend to become corporations. Successful corporations tend to become institutions. Institutions foster bureaucracy, the most superficial and fatuous of all relationships. Bureaucracy can level our gifts and our competence. Tribal storytellers, the tribe's elders, must insistently work at the process of corporate renewal. They must preserve and revitalize the values of the tribe. They nourish a scrutiny of corporate values that eradicates bureaucracy and sustains the individual. Constant renewal also readies us for the inevitable crises of corporate life.

The goal of renewal is to be a corporate entity that gives us space to reach our potential as individuals and, through that, as a corporation. Renewal comes through genuine service to others. It cannot come about through a process of mere self-perpetuation. Renewal is an outward orientation of service, rather than an inward orientation of maintenance. Renewal is the concern of everyone, but it is the special province of the tribal storyteller.

Every company has tribal stories. Though there may be only a few tribal storytellers, it's everyone's job to see that things as unimportant as manuals and light bulbs don't replace them.

## **Who Owns This Place?**

Broadly speaking, there are three categories of owners in the typical American corporation. The first group, those normally thought of as owners, invest mere cash in the business. The second, because they have dedicated their working years to the corporation, invest their lives and their gifts in the corporation. The third group, essential contributors to the corporation, invests some special skill or talent or creative energy and have a strong commitment to the corporation, but part-time.

Ownership demands increasing maturity on everyone's part. Maturity is probably best in a continually rising level of literacy: business literacy, participative literacy, ownership literacy, and competitive literacy. The group of owners committed to the same organization, to the same goals, to the same value systems must be knowledgeable in many areas. Ownership demands a commitment to be as informed about the whole as one can be.



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In the end, it is important to remember that we cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are. At Herman Miller we are committed to doing everything we can to grow both as employees and owners. As those two roles merge, adversarial postures – labor versus management or supplier versus producer or retailer versus consumer – will begin to disappear. The merging of employees and owners is already happening in many places.

The capitalist system cannot avoid being better off by having more employees who act as if they own the place.

## **Communicate!**

What is good communication? What does it accomplish? It is a prerequisite for teaching and learning. It is the way people can bridge the gaps formed by a growing company, stay in touch, build trust, ask for help, monitor performance, and share the vision. Communication clarifies the vision of participative ownership as a way of building relationship within and without the corporation.

Good communication is not simply sending and receiving. Nor is good communication simply a mechanical exchange of data. No matter how good the communication, if no one listens all is lost. The best communication forces you to listen.

A number of obligations go along with good communication. We must understand that access to pertinent information is essential to getting a job done. The right to know is basic. Moreover, it is better to err on the side of sharing too much information than risk leaving someone in the dark. Information is power, but it is pointless power if hoarded. Power must be shared for an organization or a relationship to work.

We are obligated to practice the art of scrutiny. The art of scrutiny has to do with several things: a respect for the English language, an acknowledgment that muddy language usually means muddy thinking and that our audience may need something special from us. The art of scrutiny will uncover what I call “third-class mail;” missives without meaning. Junk mail serves no more purpose in the corporate setting than it does in our homes.

Good communication liberates us to do our jobs better. It is as simple as that. Good communication allows us to respond to the demands placed on us and to carry out our responsibilities. This really means, too, that leaders can use communication to free the people they lead. To liberate people, communication must be based on logic, compassion, and sound reasoning.

As a culture or a corporation grows older and more complex, the communications naturally and inevitably become more sophisticated and crucial. An increasingly large part of that communication place in expanding cultures is to pass along values to new members and reaffirm those values to old hands.

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There may be no single thing more important in our efforts to achieve meaningful work and fulfilling relationships than to learn and practice the art of communication.

## **Pink Ice In The Urinal**

Every year in April, at the time of the Masters Golf Tournament in Augusta, the state of Georgia hosts about forty national and international industrial leaders for a one-week tour of the state. The purpose of the tour is to entice industry to move to the state of Georgia. Two or three days at the Masters are an effective way to encourage participation in the tour. Since Herman Miller has a plant in Roswell, just northeast of Atlanta, one year we were invited to be one of the host industries.

Naturally, we formed a committee to make plans for this event. In the discussion of the committee, one well-meaning person suggested that one way to dress up the facility was to put pink ice in the urinals. Despite the good intentions behind this idea, I take pink ice as a signal. Would pink ice in the urinals really help attract more industry to Georgia?

What is one of the most difficult things that we need to work on? It is the interception of entropy. I am using the word "entropy" in a loose way, because technically it has to do with the second law of thermodynamics. From a corporate management point of view, I choose to define it as meaning that everything has a tendency to deteriorate. One of the important things leaders need to learn is to recognize the signals of impending deterioration.

Remember that many people in large organizations relish apathy. They often fail to see the signs of entropy. If you and your corporation are committed to being as good as you can be, beware of pink ice in the urinals.

## **What's Next?**

At times in business, the congruence of principles and practice – or their incongruence – comes sharply into focus. Reviewing performance is a time like that; a time to ask what we are trying to do, evaluate how we are doing, and then ask, "What's next?"

Performance reviews done well are a good way of reexamining goals, realigning principles and practices, and gauging progress. Everyone should do this. Reviewing performance should be done in a timely way, with the direct involvement of the person whose performance is being reviewed. Both the people and the process should be directed toward reaching human potential.

Leaders, in a special way, are liable for what happens in the future, rather than what is happening day to day. This liability is difficult to measure, and thus the performance of leaders is difficult to measure. Though we do need to review past results and processes, the emphasis on the duties

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and performance of leaders has to be on the future. It is especially hard to remember that today's performance from a leader succeeds or fails only in the months or years to come. Much of a leader's performance cannot be reviewed until after the fact.

An effective CEO will review the performance of the senior management team. As part of a covenantal relationship, every leader must review the performance of the people he or she leads, and no doubt there are many ways of doing this. The following is essential: We must trust one another to be accountable to our own assignments. When that kind of trust is present, it is a beautifully liberating thing.

## **Some Thoughts for CEOs Who Build Buildings**

In thinking about facilities and their relation to corporate cultures, I consulted my dictionary about the word "culture." From a number of choices, most of which had to do with biology, I selected this statement: "A particular state or stage of civilization." To me this definition links rather nicely to the idea of a corporate culture, but leaves me with a question: How should we think about man-made facilities as a state or stage of civilization?

The physical environment matters a great deal, but it is not as important as the management environment. The physical environment is likely to be a consequence of certain elements of the management environment. In that sense the facility will reflect the context of a corporation, its leadership, and its values.

A facility should be a place that people can possess. Taking possession of the facility in which we work is closely linked to the idea of ownership. There is a fundamental difference, after all, between owners and renters. It is fair to say that renters are no-fault owners.

Facilities should enable and empower people to do their best. Facilities, like managers, should be vulnerable. They should encourage a rising level of knowledge about corporate life: literacy about business, the competition, relationships, and ownership. Our facilities must encourage lavish communications.

A facility should be a place of realized potential. It should be a "high touch" place: a place where we connect persons with each other and to technology in an effective and human way.

## **To Make One Vice President, Mix Well...**

The art of leadership dwells a good deal in the future, in providing for the future of the organization, in planting and growing other leaders who will look to the future beyond their own. These future leaders, at some point in their careers, receive the title of vice president. They are important to the daily operations of a corporation or an institution, but their future is vital to the future of the groups. Picking vice presidents with all these conditions in mind is not easy.

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First, the corporation requires several things from leaders in making this decision. The corporation requires:

- That the position be clearly one with responsibility on the officer level
- The establishment of this officership be a signal to the organization of the significance of this responsibility and of its importance to the future of the corporation
- That the person who fills this position demonstrate not only personal performance and achievement but also the potential for continuing growth and accountability
- That this appointment be more a matter of expectancy and challenge than of reward
- That we interpret thoroughly to the organization each appointment

Second, the organization requires several things from the people chosen to be candidates for future leaders. These people must bring to their responsibilities certain characteristics, traits that should be present in all leaders, traits talked about in this book.

Finally, beyond being a spokesperson in our organization, the new vice president should share in the basis for our values.

## **Why Should I Weep?**

Do grown men weep? Sure. Should grown men weep? Of course. Anyone in touch with reality in this world knows there are lots of reasons to weep. We weep over triumphs and over tragedies. Most good people weep over admirable actions and deplorable ones.

There are, I suspect, many people who don't weep. Why? These people are not intimate with their work. They must not be trying to live up to their potential. They must think they cannot fail. They have no covenant with their group.

What do we weep over? What should we weep over? By now, having read this far you could probably predict that I would make a list. It would be easy to add some things under the entropy in "Pink Ice in the Urinal." What would you add? Why should you weep?

## **The Marks of Elegance**

Elegant leaders always reach for completeness. What are some of the marks of elegance? What should leaders be searching for in their efforts to liberate people of high potential? The following ideas are some of the things that one needs to understand to be an elegant leader.

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Contracts are a small part of relationships. A complete relationship needs a covenant.

Intelligence and education can ascertain the facts. Wisdom can discover the truth. The life of a corporation needs both.

To give one's time doesn't always mean giving one's involvement.

Hierarchy and equality are not mutually exclusive. Hierarchy provides connections. Equality makes hierarchy responsive and responsible.

Without forgiveness, there can be no real freedom to act within a group.

Opportunity must always be connected to accountability. This is not something hopelessly idealistic. Without the promise of accountability, there are not true opportunities and risks. Without true opportunity and risk, there is not chance to seize accountability.

A whale is as unique as a cactus. But don't ask a whale to survive Death Valley. We all have special gifts. Where we use them and how determines whether we actually complete something.

Goals and rewards are only parts, different parts, of human activity. When rewards become our goals, we are only pursuing part of our work. Goals are to be pursued in healthy and rational relationships; rewards complete the process by bringing joy. Joy is an essential ingredient of leadership. Leaders are obligated to provide it.

These are my marks of elegance. In a way, writing this book is my way of working toward completion, of trying to be the best that I can. What I hope, of course, is that some of the thinking in this book helps you to be what you can be.

## **Postscript**

Leadership is much more an art, a belief, and a condition of the heart than a set of things to do. The visible signs of artful leadership are expressed, ultimately, in its practice.

## **The Pastor's Perspective**

*Leadership is an Art* is one book that has shaped my understanding of leadership as much as any other. In some ways it is hard to read; it's more a collection of insights than a story. But I have found some of those insights to be quite profound.

I'll share two of them with you.

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“The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.” It took me a while to understand what this meant; now it is one of the truths that defines how I lead. What does that mean? It means as leaders, we shape how people think. Not *what* they think, but *how*. It means we communicate what the bigger picture is, what the deepest values are, what assumptions are being made, and the consequences of different decisions.

For example, with my daughters growing up, we talked about dressing modestly. But we seldom, if ever, gave the order “dress modestly.” Rather, we helped them think through what was modest and what wasn’t; why did it matter; how do boys think about girls; what your dress communicates to others, etc. They ended up valuing modesty, but not because we commanded it; they valued it because it made sense to them.

One of my favorite Sundays in our church is “Ask the Pastor” Sunday. For one full service I just take questions from the church. They are asked anonymously, so people are free to ask their real questions without fear of being judged. There are a lot of reasons I like this time, but one of them is that it gives me an opportunity to frame my answer in a way that defines reality. And in doing that, I am shaping their thinking in a much more profound way than I could ever do simply by giving an answer.

One of the questions this year pertained to hell. The person said they were plagued with the thought of people they knew going to hell, and they couldn’t reconcile that with a God of love. That wasn’t really a theological question; in this case it was an intensely personal, emotional one.

In answering the question, I framed it in the context of God’s love. That a God who loves so much he will sacrifice his life for us will also be doing everything he possibly can to reach people. I shared stories I knew of people being visited by the Lord in their dreams; missionary stories of miraculous interventions, etc. all of which revealed a God who is still pursuing people hard. I made a point of the fact that God did not stop pursuing us after the cross. I was defining reality for the questioner.

The second insight is that “everyone gets a voice, but not everyone gets a vote.” That helped me navigate the balance of welcoming input from everyone without being at the mercy of everyone’s opinion, or having to make everyone happy. It allows me to benefit from the wisdom of those around me without giving away the authority I need to lead. Interestingly, when I explain the principle, people consistently “get it.” It frees them to share their thoughts without fear.

There are lots of others, but I’ll stop there. What are yours? What insights did you take away with you, or what would you add?