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WITH CORY HARTMAN



# **improv leadership**

**HOW TO LEAD WELL IN EVERY MOMENT**

 **ZONDERVAN  
REFLECTIVE**



## CHAPTER 1

# The Cure for the Common Leader

### How to Overcome the Cost of Leadership-as-Usual

(Stan) moved to Southern California in 1975. I made up for what I didn't have—a job—by using what I brought with me from the Midwest.

I brought my love of Jesus and his love for me. I brought my wife, Connie. I brought musical talent that I had honed with years of practice. (That was a very good thing to bring since I hoped to make it in the music business.) But I also brought something else: the example of my dad, Lyle Endicott. Most of the way I go at life I got from him, and that has made all the difference in the world.

I grew up in a small village in southern Illinois, a patch of earth divided by a railroad track running right through the middle of town. It had no stoplights—only a tiny grocery store, a post office, and my parents' furniture store. There was a little

## IMPROVleadership

diner near the railroad tracks with two pool tables in the back, and every day after school, I would go there to play. (Sometimes I would even sneak over there during lunch.) I especially loved playing a game for advanced pool players called snooker.

One ordinary day in 1963, my dad said to me, “Son, come here a second. I have something for you.” Grinning, he handed me a long, thin box that looked like the box for a BB gun. I opened the box, and to my surprise, I saw a professional pool cue with my name engraved on the side and inlaid with ivory. It was beautiful. I had never seen anything like it. But that was my dad—he always gave me gifts he knew I would love, even though I did not ask for them. He paid keen attention to my interests, even when I was unaware that he was doing so. I still have that pool cue. That gift permanently marked my life.

Dad did not treat me that way only because I was his son. He treated me that way because he saw potential in me as a person. In fact, he treated everyone that way.

My parents owned the furniture store in that small town, but people came through the door for more than furniture. My dad was determined to hold customer service as his highest value, which is why customers walked out with furniture. He cared more about them than the furniture he sold them. And the people who worked for Dad knew how much he valued them too.

Prior to building a great retail furniture business, my dad flew a Hellcat fighter in the Navy during World War II. After the war the young pilots at the local airport considered him to be their Chuck Yeager. At ninety-seven years old, Dad can't fly by himself anymore, but he recently flew with a fellow named Chris, a pilot whom he had taught to fly many years ago.

When Chris was in his early twenties, he longed to fly with

## The Cure for the Common Leader

my dad. One day the airport manager called to tell him that Lyle Endicott wanted to take him on a flight. Chris was in Dallas at the time, but that did not hold him back. He drove all night to make it to the airport by nine o'clock the next morning. My dad was keenly interested in Chris, and Chris knew it. Twenty-seven years later, I barely had to finish asking Chris to take my dad flying for his birthday. Chris's yes was automatic.

I did not realize it growing up, but all along, my dad taught me the art and soul of leadership. He made a lasting impression by investing in people, and they felt natural loyalty to him—a loyalty that, in this case, left Chris joyfully volunteering to return the favor by investing back into my dad.

Is that joyful loyalty and mutual investment present in your team? Stop for a moment and think about the member of your team who gives you the most headaches. Maybe they are underperforming. Maybe they don't take initiative. Maybe they don't communicate enough information, or maybe they communicate too much. Maybe they start relational fires wherever they go. Or maybe their commitment is in question—you are not sure they are "all in."

And maybe they know it. Maybe they are even telling you that they know what you think about them, but they don't use words to do it. Maybe when you talk, their body is rigid, their face blank. Maybe they have made themselves hard to get ahold of, and they reply to your texts with an enigmatic "OK."

Now imagine having a new relationship with that person. Imagine that whenever you say, "Can I talk to you for a second?" they lean in as eagerly as I did just before my dad surprised me with the pool cue. Imagine that when you make a big ask, they are raring to say yes, just as Chris the pilot did.

Can you picture that? What you are picturing is the result of good leadership.

Leadership moves people to do something for the greater good—often something they would not naturally do. It might be something difficult or costly, maybe even something they really don't like. But because of good leadership, they do it anyway.

Love—love that your people feel within—is the most powerful force in leadership, hands down, bar none. Love compels people to follow you and to cooperate with each other. *Love* as we know it in the English language has so many meanings. But in the context of being a leader, it means being successful at gaining someone's trust to the point that they want to be a part of what you are doing—they want a “seat at your table.”


But before your people can feel that love, *you* have to learn how to love them like never before. This book is about how to lead that way, because we need to learn the kind of leadership that inspires our people more than ever.

## The Common Model of Leadership

Before we go further, let us tell you a bit more about ourselves.

Stan is the chief culture officer at Slingshot Group. Our mission at Slingshot is to build remarkable teams. One way we do that is by matching churches and nonprofits that are looking for staff with just the right candidate for the job. With the right match, both the candidate and the organization flourish.

The other way Slingshot Group builds remarkable teams is by coaching ministry leaders in their current jobs. We help them to become more effective in what they do and to remove the roadblocks that prevent them from loving their work. Although

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## IMPROVleadership

Stan launched our coaching division, today it is led by David, our vice president of coaching. David came to Slingshot Group having achieved success in NextGen ministry. At Slingshot, he led a team that has placed over two hundred NextGen leaders across the country as well as another team that has coached three hundred-plus leaders and ministry teams.

As you may imagine, we have a wide breadth of experience with church and nonprofit staffs with whom we have engaged as coaches, as placement specialists, and as ministry leaders ourselves. Along the way, we have repeatedly encountered a common model of leadership, especially among lead and executive pastors. Its common features include stereotypical directors, systematic management, and scarce care. We believe that this model of leadership, common though it is, is self-defeating. Not to mention very, very expensive.

### **Stereotypical Directors**

We are convinced that a person of any personality type can lead well. But the world seems to gravitate toward an image of a leader with certain stock characteristics. Conversely, people who fit that stock image tend to rush to fill the leadership opportunities that come their way.

You know the type. (Maybe you *are* the type.) Decisive. Driven. Determined. Comfortable in command (or *uncomfortable* when no one else is adequate or available for command).

We even have psychometric labels for such people. In classical medicine they were known as “choleric.” They are a high *D* in DiSC or an *ET* combo in Myers-Briggs or have abundant “Fiery Red” energy in Insights Discovery.

When it comes to pastors, the church has an interesting

## The Cure for the Common Leader

relationship with the classic director stereotype. Many smaller and more traditional churches are practically allergic to it, vastly preferring pastors on the opposite side of the personality wheel. But larger and newer churches—and churches that wish to become that way—love pastors of this type, and vice versa.

So at a get-together of church planters and megachurch pastors (or their underlings, who are eager to become lead pastors themselves), they reinforce the image to one another. When they look across the table, they are often looking into a mirror. How could they *not* conclude, “This is what a successful leader looks like; this is how we do ministry”?

The stereotypical director loves getting things done. Maybe it is more accurate to say that they *hate* when things do *not* get done. Either way, they are very good at knocking out tasks. They also have a strong tendency to see everything—including ministry—in terms of tasks and accomplishment.

For many ministry staffs, achieving objectives and accomplishing tasks are the default mental model. Task accomplishment is the supreme value and the basis for praise and blame. Hiring personnel is itself just another task to complete, and a new staff member is just another cog in the ministry machine.

So when a leader on a staff like this talks to their team, they are almost always talking about tasks. *Did you send that email? Did you resolve that complaint?* But that should not be surprising. *What else are we here to do—that’s why we call it “work,” right?*

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this type of person being a pastor or any other kind of leader. (There had better not be—I, David, am this type.) But where this image is preferred, leaders who fit the mold are often allowed to take it to an extreme. Their strengths are rewarded: drive, grit, competitiveness,



## IMPROVleadership

productivity. But their weaknesses are indulged, excused, and even justified: overbearing demeanor, workaholism, undisciplined anger, arrogance. In short, this kind of leader can be a real jerk and not know it. They might even be praised for it.

### **Systematic Management**

Despite what we have said so far, many high-assertive, task-oriented lead pastors do have a way with people, especially if they were once church planters. They are often charismatic, sometimes magnetic. They are also entrepreneurial and even iconoclastic; they break the mold and make their own.

That style of ministry can be appealing, but as a church grows, something more is needed. Organizational energy must be harnessed and coordinated; order must be reestablished. The church needs reliable systems and rational management that the lead pastor is neither interested in nor able to provide.

Enter the executive pastor, and along with the XP enter axioms, structures, four-by-fours, processes, protocol, and data—more boxes to check.

Some churches excel at engineering ministry to the point that their peers look at them in awe. So do we, by the way—at a certain size, a church cannot function without such structural craftsmanship. But there is such a thing as overengineering, especially when it silently subtracts humanity from the equation. In time, overbuilt organizational architecture is revealed to be surprisingly brittle.

### **Scarce Care**

The type of leadership we have been describing is heavy on accomplishment and light on relationship. Ironically, that

## The Cure for the Common Leader

kind of leadership is also *light on leadership*, because without relationship, you cannot lead anybody anywhere. This is especially true for younger generations, particularly when they do not feel appreciated.

Cue the sarcastic pantomime of someone pathetically playing a violin. And roll your eyes at the oversensitive millennials. But if you are married, think about your marriage for a moment. A marriage is not sustained by occasional grand gestures. If your marriage merely consists of you doing your thing, your spouse doing their thing, occasional “staff meetings” between the two of you, and doing something nice once in a great while, your marriage is not likely to last.

Yet that is how many leaders function with their teams. Their actions essentially say, “You do your thing; I do mine. I will give you the occasional attaboy, but I am never really going to know you, and for that matter, you will never really know me. Once a year I might give you a raise and maybe a gift card to Olive Garden. (See? I appreciate you!)”

Then they wonder why team members leave—and why they are left to deal with the headache of replacing key people.

## The Cost of Common Leadership

If there is anything we have learned as staffing specialists, it is this: people quit managers much more often than they quit jobs. Let that sink in for a minute.

People occasionally do leave jobs for opportunities to do new and greater things. And sometimes people leave jobs for various family reasons. But people probably leave for reasons like these less often than you might think—especially when you

## IMPROVleadership

are thinking about your own organization, where it is easiest for you to have blinders on. You know the reasons that departing staff have given you for leaving. But we want you to consider this question seriously: *What are your people silently telling you that they are not saying with words?*

It is a rare person who will be more loyal to their supervisor than their supervisor is to them. But think about what the common leadership model communicates to the people being led. It says, *I keep you here because you accomplish tasks. I keep you here because you help build me a big church. I keep you here because you make me money.* But conversely, it also says, *I don't keep you here because I care about you. I don't keep you here because I know your kids. I don't keep you here because I want you to flourish.* If no loyalty is communicated to your people, what will keep them loyal to you?

Make no mistake, there are plenty of reasons to leave. Job posts get circulated. Websites aggregate position openings. It takes only a few clicks for members of your team to picture



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## **The Cure for the Common Leader**

themselves somewhere else. Every day we see people leaving jobs to take the exact same job in a place that they hope is better than the place they came from.

On top of that, your best people are being approached directly by other organizations. When you have great people, others will try to recruit them. When others see talent, they want it on their team, and the church is no different. It is your job as a leader to keep them from going. It is your job to create an environment that your best people could not imagine leaving.

Do you work at it every day? Because there are heavy costs for neglecting that duty.

### **Counting the Cost**

The common model of leadership incurs heavy opportunity costs—the chances a team misses because it is not as productive as it could be. But setting opportunity costs aside for the moment, look at the costs directly related to losing and replacing a staff member.

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## IMPROVleadership

I (David) worked in a student ministries position for several years. At the peak of the ministry, my campus served 250 students a week. When I left that ministry for a new job, the church had an interim student ministries director as a stop-gap for a year before they brought a new guy on board. When he took over, he had twelve students to work with. (You read that right.) Everything collapsed in the transition; there was no handoff of students, volunteers, or momentum. The new director was a gifted and hardworking individual, and he grew the ministry back to about 175 students. But it took him five years to do it.

Those lost years—not to mention the lost people—came in a situation where the church selected the *right* person to fill the open position. Now imagine what would have happened if they had hired the wrong one.

With a little effort, we can estimate the monetary cost of replacing a key staff member. If you hire a staffing agency to find an ideal candidate, that comes with a cost. It is increasingly common for larger churches to offer a signing bonus for upper-echelon positions, so add in another few thousand dollars for that. Do not forget a few grand for moving expenses. More importantly, add three to six months' worth of compensation because it will take that long for the new hire to learn enough and build enough rapport in their new position to start making the contributions you hired them to make. Then add in the monetary value of the time you and other staff had to redirect toward finding and hiring a new candidate and keeping things going in the absence of the person you lost. Finally, do not ignore the lost revenue from church members who were attached to the previous person and either left the church or

## The Cure for the Common Leader

scaled down their giving, not to mention the attrition caused by a struggling program, as was described in the example of David's departure.

All in all, how high can the tab run as the effects of the lost staff member and the new hire ripple through the organization? For a key position, a church can expect to spend tens of thousands of dollars to find a replacement for that hire. We would argue that in a small- to medium-size church, even though the absolute cost might be much lower, the cost as a percentage of the annual budget might be even greater than in a big church.

So if you have never considered it before, consider it now: if you succeed day in and day out at helping your people love their work, that could win you the greatest cost savings in your entire budget. On the other hand, if you neglect that task, you might play a part in incurring the largest unplanned expense of your organization—not once, but over and over again.

### The Things That Are Beneath You

The staffing side of Slingshot Group regularly posts open ministry positions on social media. Once when we posted a position, a reader commented, "You mean there's no one in that church who wants that job? That's a red flag for me."

Now, we believe strongly in the value of what we do at Slingshot Group. We believe that even if the modern church were as healthy and godly as it could possibly be, there would *always* be times when it would be the right thing for a church to hire outside itself and for a leader to move from one church to another. We believe we do a superlative job of helping make that happen. Nevertheless, we have to admit that the commenter on

our post has a point. Slingshot and similar firms exist because churches' current leaders do not meet their expectations for their next staff member or because none of them will take the job.


Why is that?

Many churches ask us to help them with their staffing needs because they have high turnover or because they cannot retain top talent. They want us to deliver them a new hire who will stanch the personnel bleeding. We can help them do that. But it often requires us to do more than just present a sterling candidate. It often requires us to ask, "Why do you go through a new staff member every two years?"

Patrick Lencioni calls organizational health—a minimum of infighting and a maximum of joy and productivity—the single greatest competitive advantage in business. He cites Southwest Airlines as a shining example. When Lencioni asked Herb Kelleher, Southwest's CEO, why more competitors do not copy them, Kelleher replied, "They think it is beneath them."<sup>1</sup>

We say to many lead and executive pastors, "The things you might think are beneath you have become the reasons you are facing your current problems."

As we said before, Slingshot Group was founded to build remarkable teams. Our staffing division makes that happen by bringing great people from one organization to another. But our coaching division addresses the same challenge from a different angle. In effect, we offer a preventive maintenance program for the problem of high turnover. We envision a transformed church where no leader changes organizations because they are running *from* anything but only because they are running *to* the next waypoint on their mission from God.

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## The Alternative: IMPROVleadership

For decades, I (Stan) have been coaching people to excel at what they do and to love it. But as Slingshot Group grew from one coach (me) to many, I needed to find a way to coach our coaches in coaching. My coaching skills had developed naturally over time, so it was a challenge to know how to foster those skills in others. I needed to leave a trail of footprints that others could follow.

Together with Will Mancini, Slingshot's senior leadership advisor, David and I defined a coaching model embodied in five competencies that could be transferred to others. Our coaches learned the model and used it in their talks with our clients—lead pastors, executive pastors, NextGen pastors, worship pastors, nonprofit leaders, and more—to help them thrive in ministry.

We were blown away when we saw joy, productivity, and staying power erupt in the lives of the people we were coaching. But we saw something even more surprising—something we never anticipated. Senior leaders—lead and executive pastors—asked us to teach them how to coach their people the way we had coached them. They wanted to see everyone on their staff love and excel in what they do. They caught a vision for what could happen if everyone experienced the kind of vocational, relational joy they had been feeling and how it could transform their churches and pour fuel onto their ministries.

So we trained senior leaders as if they were our coaches, and they coached their people. Ministry teams were transformed. Even leaders who worked together but could barely speak to each other began serving together as teammates.

## The Cure for the Common Leader

Then we were invited to deliver the same coaching training to entire staffs so that they could coach their volunteers. The transformation that started in the life of one senior leader began penetrating and permeating a whole organization.

We saw that God was doing something. We realized that if all leaders adopted the competencies of coaches, the common model of leadership would be turned inside out. Precious resources would be saved. Productivity would soar. And the world would know that we are disciples of Jesus because we love one another (John 13:35).

So today we are sharing what we have learned with the world. We call it IMPROVleadership.

### Loving People

IMPROVleadership can be summed up as a way of leading that treats your people like people, not merely as accomplishers of tasks. We know—you already treat your people like people. But the question is, do *they* know that?

My (Stan's) son Nate was a great baseball player as a teenager—a high school star who won a scholarship to play ball at a Division I college. Eighteen years later, Nate and I went to the Rose Bowl Game on New Year's Day, and we ran into one of my former work colleagues whom I had not seen in years (which is something of a miracle amid a hundred thousand people). The first words out of his mouth when he saw Nate—now in his forties—were, “Are you still playing baseball? Your dad used to talk about you all the time. He was so proud of you.”

In that moment, two things happened. First, Nate felt loved. It was an out-of-the-blue reminder that I take so much joy in him and in what he does that I have to share it with other people.

## IMPROVleadership

The second thing was that *I* felt loved by my old friend. It showed me that when I had talked about my son years before, he took a keen interest in what mattered to me, so much so that he remembered it instantly many years later.

Here is the lesson: that moment might easily never have happened. I am not just talking about the coincidence of running into an old friend at the Rose Bowl; I mean the conversation that happened so naturally. I have always loved Nate, but he would not have been reminded I love him in that moment if I had not been in the habit of praising him to other people. My friend loved me, but I wouldn't have been reminded of it if he had not engaged with me about my life's unfolding story years before.

As with your children and your spouse, so with your team at work. It is not enough that *you* know you love them. It is not even enough that *they* know you love them. They have to *feel* you love them if they are going to give you their all for the long haul. As we said before, the love that your team feels within is the most powerful force in leadership. We did not make this up—we learned it from the Master.

### **Disciplemaking 101**

Jesus had been healing people and proclaiming the kingdom for a long time—maybe two years—and had acquired a large number of disciples who followed him and learned from him. But one day, Jesus took his movement to a new level. He chose twelve men to be his staff and successors. He called them apostles (Luke 6:13).

Mark's Gospel describes this moment in a curious way, but it is so subtle that it is easy to miss: "He appointed twelve that

## The Cure for the Common Leader

they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (3:14–15).

The most interesting—and convicting—words in this sentence are small, simple ones: *with him*.

Jesus appointed twelve that they might be with him. Grammatically, it is a complete thought. Jesus’s first purpose for calling the Twelve was for them to be with him.

Yes, Jesus also appointed them that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. Yet that was Jesus’s second purpose, not only grammatically and sequentially but logically. You cannot send someone *from* you unless they are *with* you first. The apostles could not really go *for* Jesus unless they had been *with* Jesus.

This pattern is basic to our entire faith. We do not get to be *with* God by doing things *for* God, which is the operating system underlying every religious impulse humans naturally have. Paul calls that principle “the elements of the world” (Galatians 4:3, 9; Colossians 2:8, 20 CSB).

That works-based mindset—*for* God, then *with* God—may be universal, but it is completely backward. Nothing we can do for God will ever qualify us to be with him. Rather, we get to be with him because he went to the nth degree to *be with us*. God the Son became incarnate to be with us; he died on the cross so we could be with him.

Because we can be *with* God through Christ, we are now finally in a position to do something *for* God. It is our delight, not just our duty.

This is not breaking news when it comes to our theology. We might even embrace it (perhaps with struggle) when it comes to our ministry. But does this idea ring true in our leadership?

## IMPROVleadership

Let us ask you something. When you hire someone to your staff, do you hire them first to do something *for* you, or first to be *with* you? Do you let yourself be with them? Even if you inherited your staff, the questions still apply. What are the proportions of “with” and “for” in your working relationships? Do both your words and your actions communicate to your team that you want them to be with you in a meaningful way?

This is how Jesus operated, and he set an example for us to follow. And we should want to follow it—after all, he did launch the greatest disciplemaking movement the world has ever seen. It is our job to continue it. At the end of the day, the principles of IMPROVleadership may simply be part of the syllabus of Disciplemaking 101.

## Why People Stay

People are drawn to take a new position in a new organization for all kinds of reasons. They might relish the challenge. The position might allow them to focus more of their energies on what they do best. They might have a strong attraction to the location, or they might be eager for a step up in salary.

But the reasons for which people go to a new workplace are not usually the main reasons they stay there. Good people—people with the talent to go elsewhere—mainly stay in one place because people care about them, their supervisor most of all. It is because when they show up in the morning, they are not greeted first by action items but by active interest. It is because they are serving someone who knows them and their story. It is because they know that if they were ever to announce their resignation, their boss would be in their driveway within the

## **The Cure for the Common Leader**

hour, saying, “Let’s talk,” with genuine concern. Frankly, it is because they know someone gives a rip whether they work there or not.

At any given time, there may be people on your team whom you want to transition out. But what are you doing about the rest? Intellectual, data-based, process-oriented managerial advice is not going to solve this for you. But something else will: being in your people’s lives and really understanding them. In other words, love they can feel.