

~ The ~  
LEADERSHIP  
WISDOM  
of  
JESUS

PRACTICAL LESSONS  
FOR TODAY



THIRD EDITION, REVISED AND EXPANDED

Charles C. Manz

An Excerpt From

***The Leadership Wisdom of Jesus:  
Practical Lessons for Today, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition***

by Charles C. Manz

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# INTRODUCTION

## *A Call to Wise and Compassionate Leadership*

When you are called upon to lead, in any capacity, are you effective? Is your leadership ethical and just? Are you able to provide positive influence for others that benefits them as well as the end that is being served?

Now let's go even deeper. Are you able to lead yourself effectively? Do you serve as an ethical, moral, effective example for others? Do you lead with humility? Do you lead with compassion? Have you mastered the arts of forgiveness and service? Can you be like a child when that is required? Do you understand and put into practice the Golden Rule? Do you know the secret of mustard seed power?

There is a powerful and informative literature dating back hundreds of years that addresses historical thinking on wisdom. It is especially centered on the writings and teachings of mostly ancient, and usually religious, leaders. A number of historical leaders and thinkers have achieved a special level of greatness and wisdom. King Solomon, Moses, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Buddha, Gandhi, Muhammad, and many others have struck a chord with multitudes in an unusually powerful way. As our contemporary knowledge continues to expand dramatically, it would be a grave mistake to forget the vast wisdom of such key historical figures.

It is in this spirit that I undertook this project. Initially I had intended to draw on the teachings of three or four renowned historical leaders, but I quickly concluded that the thinking of each deserves a separate volume. It is my sincere hope that reflecting on the leadership wisdom contained in this book will provide the reader with special insights that cannot be gained from contemporary leadership thought alone.

Of course times have changed over the past millennia. Some of us will question whether the wisdom of the ancient past is relevant today, especially wisdom that is often connected with religions. This is especially true if we take the traditional view of organizations as existing only to maximize profit and return on investment for shareholders. Yet looking beyond profit and financial return is quite a contemporary idea. Again and again companies that are putting the welfare of their employees and customers first are rising to the top as the highest performers over the long run. Sometimes an attitude of service is the best way to achieve bottom-line gains. But even when it is not, an enlightened and educated population is realizing that doing what is right (ethically, morally, and otherwise) is usually a much more satisfying and worthwhile way to live than focusing first on the bottom line. Besides, most of us could stand to learn more about wisdom, even if we choose not to act according to all of its teachings.

This book is about leadership lessons from the teachings of Jesus. The very name Jesus conjures up all kinds of images and emotions. Some people initially feel very positive and open. Others are hesitant. Still others are likely to be threatened and put off. My intention in exploring the leadership lessons contained in Jesus' teachings is to provide to a broad audience helpful insights that transcend cultural heritage or religious background. I sincerely believe that there is a great deal we all can learn about relating to and influencing one another from the challenging and penetrating teachings of Jesus. Indeed, his powerful leadership lessons point to a fresh approach that can enable both leaders and followers to maintain their integrity, live on a higher plane, and ultimately reach their personal and professional goals through sound, practical principles.

It is important to note that much of the wisdom of Jesus' teachings does not directly address leadership. Nevertheless, I believe that his teachings offer a wealth of ethical and practical guidance for leadership practice. Thus, throughout the book I will first share excerpts from Jesus' teachings, then offer reflections on the implications for leadership, and then suggest lessons for aspiring wise and compassionate leaders.

My intention is not to be religious in focus. Rather, I will address the subject of leadership in a way that captures some of the spiritual yet practical wisdom of the teachings of Jesus. Extensive debate has occurred on the literal veracity versus the symbolic nature of the Bible's account of Jesus' life and teachings. Some writers have questioned how many of the quotations found in the New Testament Gospels can accurately be attributed directly to Jesus.<sup>1</sup> This book will treat the biblical text as a historical record of lessons that are consistent with the tenor of Jesus' thinking and that provide wisdom from which to learn.

Jesus was especially fond of using parables—simple stories illustrating moral lessons—in his teaching. He also made extensive use of short sayings, especially aphorisms (memorable one-liners). Many of his teachings were repeated frequently, sometimes through a slightly different story or an alternative captivating saying. Although Jesus had a great deal to say about a variety of issues, many of his teachings focus especially on such common, powerful themes as the advantages of forgiveness over judgment, the importance of love and service, the power of humility, and the wisdom of recognizing the deeper value of every person. Consequently, some of the lessons I discuss overlap with others. This is arguably an important strength of Jesus' teachings.

He made sure that his important points were not missed. By reviewing important ideas, often from slightly different perspectives, his teachings were woven into a complementary whole. Ultimately, when Jesus' lessons have unfolded side by side, the complete picture they create might be thought of as a beautiful yet highly effective hand-painted fan, a priceless work of art for power-filled living. I hope that this book does a reasonable job of linking important parts of that whole to practical issues of leading ourselves and others.

Regardless of your religious beliefs, the lessons provided herein should help shed light on the path to effective leadership. More important, I believe, the lessons presented reveal a great deal about the constructive power of unleashing the positive spirit of leadership—of being right with the inner value and spirit of human beings—while engaging in the act of influencing ourselves and others. This is a very important goal because although many types of leadership can coerce, bribe, or inspire the desired behavior and performance of followers in the short run, long-run development and performance require influence that is more consistent with the inner truth of each person. I believe that all human beings desire (and perhaps require), at some level, dignity and a commitment to a positive spiritual connection with others. Treating people right and helping them to be right with themselves and the rest of the world is perhaps the only legitimate choice for long-term effective leadership.

One important caveat should be kept in mind: sometimes when we refer to positive personal outcomes we are talking about the very long term. Although Jesus addressed many practical issues and needs of his day, he was ultimately concerned with life beyond earthly existence. Thus his teachings were not necessarily intended to pay off in a human lifetime. Some of



his wisdom may point the way to what is moral and good, yet not lead to the power, wealth, or other leadership trappings to which many aspire. In some cases, in the short run it may lead to the opposite. Surprisingly, however, Jesus' wise teachings are frequently proving to be consistent with many contemporary leadership principles that are leading to tremendous payoffs for enlightened leaders and their organizations in the here and now.

Many books have been written that prescribe leadership tactics designed to squeeze out immediate self-serving payoffs. Some instruct leaders to be commanding and intimidating. Others point to reward or incentive-based leadership that exchanges desired rewards for follower compliance. Still others argue that leaders should be inspiring and visionary, swayers of the masses through charisma and the captivating pull of the leaders' causes. Leadership books have shared the insights of well-known military commanders, presidents, martyrs, and prominent business executives. Indeed, the lessons of a vast array of famous individuals have been written about at length, from Attila the Hun to Abraham Lincoln to Mahatma Gandhi to Winston Churchill to Lee Iacocca to Jack Welch. The lessons included in this book will draw from the wise yet practical insights of Jesus about leadership—a kind of leadership that is profoundly effective and at the same time based on a deeper wisdom and recognition of spirituality.

This book should encourage the reader to confront some very important but often overlooked aspects of being a leader. Bending the will of others to your own may serve your immediate objectives in the short run. However, the leadership that Jesus teaches offers some tremendous long-term advantages for the leader as well as the led. In the end, leadership based on

sound, positive principles, such as living by the Golden Rule and leading by serving others, may be the only real way to serve yourself and master the true art of leadership. This art promises to ascend well above leadership myths that tempt us to become great in a worldly sense at the expense of other people. It teaches some seemingly strange but powerful leadership lessons, like racing for last place, cleansing your insides, putting the gavel away, and using the power of golden mustard seeds. These and many other lessons are discussed in detail in the chapters that follow. Careful study of these lessons may change your thinking about leadership forever and provide valuable insights into how to promote a more constructive and compassionate world for all of us.

## PART ONE



# CLEAN THE MIRROR IMAGE

*The first step to becoming an effective leader is to look in the mirror. Master the art of leading yourself and you will lay the foundation for helping others to do the same.*

# LOGS BEFORE SPECKS, OR LEAD THYSELF FIRST



*Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. (Matt. 7: 3–5; New Revised Standard Version)*

As you consider the above passage, do some leaders you have worked for or people you have worked with come to mind?<sup>1</sup> Have you known some irritating hypocrites? This seems to be a common reaction, but perhaps the more important question is, did you consider yourself as one in possible need of the advice offered in the passage? If you did not, then perhaps this passage can be especially helpful to you.

Let's think for a minute. Would you like to become an effective leader? Would you like to have a significant and positive impact on others, on the world, or on history? Jesus provides some striking advice for moving toward this end. One of his key lessons suggests that if you want to lead others you should first—do what? Become more commanding so that you can bend the will of others to your own? No, that's not it. Work on your charisma so you can inspire others to do what you want? No, again. Develop the ability to identify what

people want and provide it as an incentive for complying with what you lead them to do? No, that's not it either. Learn how to uncover the shortcomings of others and berate them for their failures until they do what you demand of them? No, no, no! All of these things may enable you to influence others, at least in the short run, but they just do not provide the proper foundation for effective leadership. The first step, Jesus seems to say, is to look in the mirror.

Usually when we think about leadership we think about one person (the leader) influencing someone else (the follower). In fact, when we are in a position of leadership it is typical to think that our job is to tell others what to do. That is, leaders are expected to evaluate others and tell them how they need to change and improve, and ultimately those others are expected to do what they're told.

Jesus' teachings, conversely, give rise to a quite different view of how we should approach the subject of leadership. We are challenged first to examine ourselves and get our own act together before we try to lead others. This is a hard lesson to learn. It is so tempting to want to skip this step. After all, pointing out the problems that other people have and providing the answers to their problems can be very gratifying; so can directing and commanding others at our whim. It can make us feel competent, special, and even superior.

*"First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."* This is a haunting phrase. It suggests that the very fact that we believe we know what is wrong with others, that we have the answer to their problems, and that we should direct them to our solution is a problem in itself. It is a log that can blind us to our own shortcomings. Jesus points out that we are focusing on

others' specks—relatively minor problems—rather than on our own large log, that we are ignoring our own log by presuming that we should direct and control others when we haven't even bothered to explore our own humanness and shortcomings. In that sense we are truly blinded by the gratifying feeling of power over others that enables us to forget how flawed, how messed up we ourselves are. Careful self-examination and a sincere willingness to seek ways of improving ourselves provide the foundation for effective leadership. When we don't engage in this honest self-evaluation and corrective process, we set ourselves up for doing more harm than good.

All this does not mean that it is never appropriate to try to influence—to lead—others. On the contrary, providing constructive, effective, ethical leadership is one of the greatest acts of service we can perform (more on leadership as service later). But leadership of others needs to come from an honest appreciation of our own humanness—from a sound, caring base of humility and a practical understanding of the unique human struggle that each of us faces as we try to be right with our life and the world. Jesus points to a kind of leadership that recognizes the value of each person and is exercised out of a sense of caring and commitment to the well-being of those being led. It also recognizes that each of us is ultimately our own leader when leadership is performed on a higher spiritual plane.

I have found this personal struggle to direct and motivate ourselves constructively to be at the heart of the search for a full and satisfactory life. In my own consulting and executive development work it has been humbling to realize that often things go much better the less I try to direct and "lead." Frequently my best work has resulted from simply listening sincerely and helping my clients figure out what is best for themselves—that

is, helping and allowing them to solve their own problems. When I try to be wise and expert and force all my concepts, ideas, and knowledge into my service, I interfere with my clients' self-discovery. Worse, at times I completely miss the boat and get bogged down with my own opinions and view of the world.

I have learned that the best consultants are the ones who recognize how limited their knowledge really is, who continually learn and improve themselves, and most of all, who recognize that the real experts are usually the clients, who have to live with their problems every day. The trick is for the consultant to remove, or neutralize as much as possible, their own blinders (logs) and help clients sort through the often tiny specks that are blocking their own barely hidden solutions. I believe that the same principle applies to almost anyone leading or helping someone else: be humble and assume that most people know a heck of a lot more about their problem than you do.

By becoming more effective in our own self-leadership not only do we gain greater insight and empathy for others, who also struggle to make good choices and improve themselves, but we also serve as a model, which is central to leadership. Being a model in this sense does not mean that we want others to imitate and be exactly like us. Rather, we can serve as an example of someone who has sincerely struggled with being personally effective and has found his or her own way. As a result we are in a better position to help others find their own way as well. On occasion when I finish a training program or a consulting project the client says to me something like, "You really practice what you preach. You got us to solve our own problem." For me that is the greatest compliment I can receive as a consultant.

The powerful leadership lesson that Jesus teaches us is that if we don't take the important step of looking in the mirror and examining and leading ourselves first, we can be blinded by this shortcoming. It is as though we have a big wood sliver—indeed, a log—in our eye so that we cannot see others clearly. First remove the log and get right with yourself, then serve as an example and source of help (leadership) for others.

The primary prerequisites for leadership and for administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) contain some insightful similarities. Obviously we need to be alive, conscious, and breathing before we start trying to revive others through CPR. Similarly, living and leading ourselves properly is like the breath that sustains our ability to lead others and to guide them on how to work and live. Many people believe that leadership is restricted to an outward influence process that requires leaders to lead and followers to follow, and that leadership is not something we can do for ourselves. On the contrary, leaders and followers form an organic whole that is required for leadership to unfold, and at the very core of the leadership process leaders and followers are one and the same. We can and do lead ourselves. Self-leadership is the breath, and without it the leader is in need of some serious leadership CPR.

That brings us back to Jesus' lesson of logs before specks. How can people expect to lead others effectively if they won't take the time—in fact, if they refuse to make an effort—to live their own lives (to lead themselves) positively and constructively first? According to Jesus they cannot. To do so is like trying to carry on without taking the time to breathe.





TO BECOME AN EFFECTIVE LEADER FOR OTHERS,  
FIRST LEARN TO LEAD YOURSELF

# THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST



*He asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9: 33–35)*

Jesus took a surprising and fascinating approach to the topic of achieving fame and glory. In fact, he suggested that the only sure way to become great is to seek just the opposite. He taught that if you want to come in first, then purposely put yourself last. He directed that we should become last of all and the servant of all. That is an awfully hard pill for most of us to swallow. Much that we have learned about human nature suggests how important it is to build up our self-esteem and our belief in ourselves. In this spirit the virtues of accomplishment in athletics, academics, work, and so forth have been prescribed as healthy medicine for our psyche. The right to say, "I'm number one!" has become a compulsive quest for millions around the world.

Yet Jesus says, don't aim to be first; be last. What gives? I don't think Jesus is recommending that we should strive for mediocrity, or that we should waste rather than develop and apply our talents. Indeed, fruitfully using our gifts in constructive ways is a common theme throughout the Bible. But Jesus

sends a clear message that we should not exaggerate our sense of superiority, that we should not become too caught up in our own importance. Most of all, he seems to be saying that those who are directly striving to be great as an end in itself are going at it the wrong way. Be humble and don't be a conceited self-advocate; be a servant and strive to put others first—this is the path to greatness, though often camouflaged and hard to see, that Jesus prescribes. Of course Jesus was especially concerned with greatness in a spiritual sense, in terms of God's realm, and not so much in a worldly sense. Nevertheless, the philosophy he advocated—humility, service, forgiveness—can lead to the kind of respect and love from others that many view as the real signs of "greatness."

Jesus went even further in his instructions to the disciples:

*The disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18: 1-4)*

The idea of becoming like a child will likely affect readers in a variety of ways. Certainly the idea of becoming passive and naive will not strike many as particularly constructive. The important lesson that I take from this passage, however, is the idea of becoming "humble like this child." Again, this means resisting the temptation to become too full of ourselves, puffed up with an exaggerated sense of self-importance. Of course a variety of other positive images can be gleaned from mounting research that points to the positive benefits—increased health, creativity, ability to learn, and so on—of regaining some of our

ability to be like children (playful, lighthearted, and inquisitive). Jesus' ideas run counter to many hardened adults' natural tendencies to become cynical, closed off, and self-centered in an increasingly complex and stressful world.

On another occasion, when Jesus attended what apparently was a formal dinner at the home of an important man, he used the opportunity to teach further. This time he seemed to suggest that being recognized as important is not all bad, but it needs to be based on a solid foundation of humility.

*When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 14: 7-11)*

Most people appreciate those who don't emphasize their own accomplishments and status. This is especially true when that person does have the power or recognition to command the attention of others. We all want to feel OK about ourselves, and being around persons of some notoriety and power can provoke difficult emotional reactions. If they flaunt their status, we may feel inadequate or angry at their pretentious behavior. Conversely, if they act with humility and greet others with respect, we are able to enjoy their prestige and status. It is as

though we share in it and experience it vicariously ourselves. Jesus' dinner story drives this lesson home vividly so that we are able to come face to face with the powerful correlation between humility and greatness.

When I reflect on these ideas I can't help but think of Donald Petersen, who led the Ford Motor Company at a crucial time in the organization's history. He became CEO in the wake of very high-profile leaders, including Henry Ford II and Lee Iacocca. It was difficult for many people to think of his name, and it was not unusual for newspapers to misspell it. As a leader he preached empowerment, teamwork, trust, cooperation, and the importance of every employee.<sup>1</sup> He openly confessed to enjoying his lack of star status. "We don't want stars. . . . Being part of a team is a much more productive environment. I feel very comfortable with the lack of spotlight and limelight."<sup>2</sup>

As an example of the positive leadership that Petersen brought to Ford, Jack Telnack, Ford's chief of design when Petersen was president, told the following story: After looking over a design, Petersen asked Telnack if the car depicted was the kind of car he would like to drive. Telnack pondered the question and decided to answer honestly: "Absolutely not. I wouldn't want that car parked in my driveway." Petersen then asked him to design something he would be proud of. The phenomenally successful rounded "jelly bean" cars (such as the Taurus) resulted. After years of autocratic leadership, Telnack's chance to do some self-leading had finally come at Ford, and he responded with one of the most successful designs in automotive history.<sup>3</sup>

This humble leader was indeed a key component of Ford's turnaround in the early to mid-1980s. And despite Petersen's low-profile style and avoidance of the spotlight, by focusing on

others rather than on himself (his choice of humble seating), he was awarded a place of honor among leaders: in 1988, in a Fortune 500/CNN Moneyline poll, he was chosen by his peer CEOs as the most effective leader in America, even beating out the high-profile runner-up, Lee Iacocca, at Chrysler.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, it appears in many ways history has repeated itself. Alan Mulally, chosen as Ford's CEO in the wake of Bill Ford's relatively high-profile stint in the office, has demonstrated some similar tendencies to Petersen. Champion of the Boeing 777 airliner at Boeing, Inc., where he was discovered by Ford in 2006, Mulally came to the company with absolutely no car industry experience and is known to forgo tailored suits in favor of less grandiose khakis and blue blazers. Leading Ford's sale of the various more glamorous brands it had accumulated over the years—Jaguar, Land Rover, Aston Martin, Volvo, and Mazda—that distracted from its core business, Mulally helped orchestrate the return to a focus on the seemingly more humble (in comparison) Ford and Lincoln brands. Mulally became the sole American auto company CEO that turned down bailout money from the US government. Ford was the only company to avoid bankruptcy during the time that both General Motors and Chrysler failed, and more recently underwent a remarkable turnaround to profitability.

Mulally helped engineer a transition to encouraging getting along and working together collaboratively at Ford and less infighting between clashing fiefdoms headed by self-aggrandizing executives. He helped unite formerly competing factions where possible and, in some cases, helped those that couldn't work together to move on to somewhere other than Ford. His executive team was created largely from Ford veterans who would work together for a common purpose. According

to Ford America's president, Mark Fields, a tipping-point event early in Mulally's tenure was particularly important for the then never-report-bad-news-or-else culture.<sup>5</sup> At a meeting of Ford senior global executives, Fields showed a chart with red on it, indicating problems with a new Ford vehicle about to be launched. Normally executives at Ford almost exclusively used green charts, as was the case at this particular meeting. In response to the unusual red chart, Fields said others in attendance slid their chairs away to distance themselves. The question was how would the new CEO Mulally respond? He applauded.

The message was quickly becoming clear. For Mulally, supporting one another and honestly admitting problems and mistakes that needed to be corrected was more important than feigning success to seek false adulation. And for this meeting, the man with the "last place" red chart, in comparison to all the other "everything-is-great" green ones, was symbolically moved to first position. Like Petersen, Mulally himself received acclaim for his no-pretense leadership—receiving the most reader votes for *Fortune's* Business Person of the Year in 2010 and being chosen as *Automobile Magazine's* 2010 Man of the Year.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, Jesus pointed to a fascinating paradox. Greatness comes more from avoiding it than from seeking it. Or maybe more accurately, the seeds of greatness derive from humility and service. Don't seek honor. Rather, let it seek you in its own way and when the time is right. Don't even think about it. Go about your business pursuing constructive work and focus on honoring and recognizing the contributions of others rather than your own. If you do this sincerely, your efforts will often receive the recognition they deserve, and more, as long as you don't seek and expect it.

I have personally found this to be true with many students I have worked with over the years. The more I have tried to

honor my students and put them first, the more I have received honor as a result of their motivation and enthusiasm. When I have encouraged them to pursue their own interests and to apply and celebrate their unique talents, they have often pulled me into highly productive projects. Sometimes they seem to work too hard. On more than one occasion I have found myself advising “turned on” students to slow down a little, to work less hard on our projects, and in effect to honor me less.

In summary, try to rediscover natural childlike qualities (that are too often driven out of us at an early age) such as curiosity and playfulness that can feed creativity and innovation, and combine humility with a natural optimism that you can accomplish whatever you set out to do. All the while, practice being in awe of the unique and wonderful contributions each human being makes, and acknowledge and reinforce their efforts. These seem to be the lessons that Jesus wants us to learn.

Perhaps one of my favorite quotes, attributed to Nathaniel Hawthorne, sums it up best. It deals with happiness, but it could just as well have been focused on greatness. “Happiness is as a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you.”





THE TRUE PATH TO GREAT LEADERSHIP  
IS TO BE HUMBLE AND LOOK FOR  
THE GREATNESS IN OTHERS

this material has been excerpted from

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