

The Empowered Leader

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Empowerment. It's a word on the lips of nearly every thinking leader today. In fact, hundreds of corporations and organizations are struggling to understand and enhance empowerment because of the demonstrable impact that genuinely empowered workers are having in the workplace.

But what exactly is empowerment and how do we become empowered? Let's begin with a simple definition of an empowered person: An empowered person is one who has the ability, energy and stamina to consistently accomplish significant, meaningful goals related to his or her vision and mission in life. Now, because of the focus of this article, let me link this definition of an empowered person to an empowered leader.

You might find useful the following definition of a leader: "A leader is a person who influences people to accomplish a purpose." Someone can be an effective leader without having a formal position of leadership, while others can occupy positions of leadership without truly leading. With the above definition in mind, let's accept that, in some respect, you are a leader. The issue then, is are you an empowered, effective leader, or have you settled for the highly unattractive alternative?

Seven Keys to Empowerment

Key #1 - Awareness of Your Gift Mix

Never — in all eternity — has there been or will there be another individual who has exactly your personality, your skills, your thoughts, your feelings. And no one has ever had your gift mix — the combination of your natural abilities, your acquired skills, and your spiritual gifts (for a deeper treatment of gift mix see *The Making of a Leader*, by Dr. J. Robert Clinton). A critical issue in empowered leadership is not simply your gift mix, but your awareness of your gift mix.

Those individuals who are most effective are typically those who have examined their gifts — through prayerful introspection, formal instrumentation, confirmation and feedback from loved ones, close friends, associates, etc. — and know what their strengths and weaknesses are. Throughout life, they will consciously – if not strategically and systematically – seek positions and avenues of service that will maximize their strengths and make their weaknesses irrelevant.

Therefore, I'll suggest that the first key to maximizing your potential and being an empowered leader is service aligned with your gift mix. If God created you to run swiftly like the cheetah, run as fast as you can. If He created you to fly high like an eagle, fly as high as you can. But as an eagle, don't spend time trying to run fast. And if you're a cheetah, don't waste time trying to sprout wings!

Key #2 - Prayer

In his wonderful book, *Power Through Prayer*, E.M. Bounds states that “Those who are little with God will be little for God.” In other words, those who spend little time with God in prayer and intimate fellowship, foolishly miss not only one of life’s most intimate joys, but what could be the greatest single source of empowerment.

It has been said that there is a bank in heaven, laden with riches and resources that no human mind can fathom. I agree. And I’m personally persuaded that because God is a loving Father, nothing would please Him more than to see a run on the bank by His kids! Yet many of us live feeble, marginally fruitful lives, while His power to radically transform us goes untapped. Just as it’s a senseless tragedy for someone to die of thirst with an oasis of cool water in reach, so it’s a tragedy (dare I say “sin”?) to live impoverished lives when the vaults of heaven lay open to our prayers.

Someone once said that “Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscles of Omnipotence.” The awesome magnitude of that omnipotence — and how we tap it through prayer — is therefore one of the most vital keys to becoming an empowered leader.

Key #3 - A Personal Pentecost

Even a casual acquaintance with Holy Scripture would convince the reader of the powerful transformation that took place on the day of Pentecost. The apostle Peter, who in his human weakness had denied Christ three times, was miraculously empowered through a dramatic visitation of the Holy Spirit. Immediately following, this same Peter boldly and courageously preached a sermon that brought 3,000 converts into the new church. What happened? He got his unction to function!

In my personal experience, the empowered Christian leader is one who has not only experienced a transforming encounter with the Spirit of God, but is one who continues to encounter Christ on a daily basis. You see, the problem with a “one-time” filling of the Spirit, as all of us can testify, is that we leak! Therefore, the empowered leader wisely returns daily to the Source of his power for continual filling.

Key #4 - Mission and Vision

The empowered leader will almost invariably have “directional intensity” — a clear sense of mission and vision. Because there is much confusion even among management and leadership authors on mission and vision, however, let me seek to clarify these critical components of empowered leadership. For although they are inextricably linked, they are also distinct.

First and foremost, a mission is a statement of *purpose*. It answers the *Why?* question, such as *Why am I here? Why does our organization offer the programs and services it does? Or as a CEO, manager or program director, Why am I doing what I’m doing?*

A vision, on the other hand, is a statement of *direction*. It answers the question, *Where am I headed? Where are we headed as an organization? While many good definitions of vision can be found, my personal definition of a vision is “a clear, compelling, magnetic and galvanizing image of a desired future state.”*

Whatever definition you might choose, we would do well to heed the conclusion of Burt Nanus in his excellent book, *Visionary Leadership*. “There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and

long range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared.”

Key #5 - Passion

It's interesting to note the etymology of the word passion. The root is from the Latin *passio*, meaning “suffering, being acted upon.” Definitions include “the emotions as distinguished from reason,” “intense, driving, or overmastering feeling,” “ardent affection,” and “a strong liking for or devotion to some object of desire or deep interest.”

Passionate people make things happen. Why? Because logic makes people *think*, emotion makes them *act*. Almost all of us live life at the feeling level, and those who have a deep appreciation of the power of feelings are well ahead of the pack when it comes to effective leadership. A good deal of effective leadership is the transference of feeling, and “ya cain't transfer what ya ain't got!”

Human beings are much like the great sailing ships of yesteryear: reason is our rudder and passion the wind in our sails. When the eminently reasonable, impeccably logical, antiseptically rational manager wonders why nobody is following, it's probably not because the rudder isn't set on the right course. There's just insufficient wind in the sails.

When it comes to leadership, an ounce of passion can be worth a ton of logic. And if you want to increase the motivational wind in your sails, try getting in touch with your deepest values, your dearest convictions, those things that really matter most to you. Tapping the deep energy reserves of core values and personal convictions can keep many ships sailing at a breathtaking pace while others have stalled helplessly on the calm seas of reason.

Key #6 - A Willingness to Fail

If I could give many leaders just one gift, it would be the freedom to fail. Why? Because the fear of failure in the eyes of others has been the cause of the depotentiation and dysfunctionality of more leaders, more organizations, and more individuals than I would care to contemplate.

Imagine the impact on our ministries if more decisions were made swiftly on the basis of what is right, rather than, like most politicians, taking polls to know what the people think before we know what we should do. From many years of experience, I am persuaded that only those who are willing to risk greatly will ever achieve greatly. They have learned, as Thomas Watson, the president of IBM once said, that “If you want to double your success rate, double your failure rate.”

Well, I can't tell everyone what the secret to success is. But I can tell you what the secret for failure is: Trying to please everyone. That's why empowered leaders know they can't please everyone, and just as important, they don't try. They're willing to do what is right, even if that means running the risk of failure.

Key #7 - Courage

“Be strong and of good courage...” Joshua 1.6

Winston Churchill once said, “Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. It is courage that counts.”

Andrew Jackson remarked that, “One man with courage makes a majority.” Certainly, courage is one of the marks of an empowered leader. Yet what is courage, after all?

Clearly, it's not the absence of fear, for nearly every great leader has been intimately acquainted with fear at some point in his or her leadership journey. In battle or situations entailing great confrontations, courage has been defined as “disciplined fear.” In other words, the trick is not to rid your stomach of butterflies, but to make them fly in formation! That's where courage comes in. And it's an asset that all truly empowered leaders enjoy.

My good friend Tim Hansel, founder of Summit Expedition and best-selling author has said, “Love without courage is mere sentimentality. Faith without courage is mere idealism. Vision without courage will never be more than a nice dream.”

Yes, empowered Christian leaders know how to love. They have faith. And they have vision. But they also realize that without courage, and without the willingness to “fall on their swords” for those things they care most deeply about, much of the Christian faith will remain just so much sentimental idealism.

Because our families, our churches, our communities, our organizations, and indeed our world desperately need empowered leaders, I encourage you to prayerfully reflect, perhaps on a scale of 1–10, how you would score on each of the keys we've discussed. Where you're strong, I salute you. And may you grow from strength to strength in His service. Where you're weak, you have a marvelous opportunity to study, refine your skills, and trust God.

As we work together toward empowered leadership, ministry and service, let's remember the purpose of that power in a dark and spiritually hungry world:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

— Acts 1.8