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Buy Into Two Truths!

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Dwight D. Eisenhower defined leadership as, "the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it." If you accept that definition of leadership (it's my favorite) then you're buying into two truths. First, you're a leader.

When I make that observation at business seminars I'm immediately greeted with looks of disbelief. Undaunted, I ask the audience a very simple question. "Have you ever been in a situation at work or home where you tried to get someone else to do something?" Immediately everyone raises their hand and nods their head.

According to Eisenhower's definition, you become a leader the moment you attempt to get someone else to do something. Since that's the case the issue isn't, are you a leader? You are! The issue is how can you lead more effectively.

Answering that question brings us to the second truth issuing out of Eisenhower's definition, namely, leaders are made not born. Since leadership is an art, effective leadership is the result of hard work not genes. So whether you've recently been thrust into a leadership role and feel as out of place as a turtle at a road race, or you're heading up a Fortune 500 Company, you need to sharpen your leadership skills.

Learning to lead is like mastering a musical instrument--there are fundamental chords that can be studied, practiced and mastered. I've discovered whether I'm meeting with the CEO of a billion dollar company or counseling a mother or father--the fundamentals of leadership are the same and must be mastered. While natural talent is a shortcut to musical excellence, it doesn't replace hard work.

Similarly, while some men and women have a natural capacity for leadership, they too must study the art and work hard at mastering the fundamentals. Those with less innate talent can still excel as leaders if they're willing to study the basics and put them into practice. Becoming an effective leader demands rigorous study and hard work.

The Leadership Model of Jesus

In three-and-a-half years Jesus established a movement that has lasted twenty centuries and involved over a billion people. He did this without traveling far from home, writing a book, leading an army, or holding a political office.

How did one man so significantly impact the world? He did it by personally training and utilizing techniques we can study, practice and eventually master. His strategy wasn't the result of a lucky toss of the dice but of a well thought out plan by a man with sterling character and finely honed leadership skills. He didn't succeed because he recruited a team of superstars, but because he passed on to his team the character traits and skills they would need to pass on to others.

Jesus didn't buy into the separation of character and competence in a leader. In fact, his harshest words were aimed at leaders who looked competent on the outside but smelled rotten on the inside. With that truth in mind, how can followers of Jesus effectively address the crisis of leadership character today?

Competency Builds on Character

Based on the interaction at the round table I'd like to make several suggestions.

First, we must develop an ongoing awareness that it is our relationship with Jesus Christ that is the source of sterling character. On the night before his death Jesus told his disciples, "I am the vine and you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

We must strive to live in an ongoing conscious awareness of the life of Christ that dwells in us. And we must daily seek him through Bible reading and prayer. One message that repeatedly came through from every round-table discussion: The cultivation of a growing personal relationship with Christ is the foundation upon which a leader's character must be built.

Second, as leaders we must consistently seek to be the same on the inside as we appear to be on the outside. That is, we must be men and women of integrity. How can we become such people? It begins with the recognition that as members of a fallen race our hearts are prone to seek out evil. Furthermore, when we commit evil deeds our natural tendency is to cover our tracks--like robbers fleeing the scene of a crime. What we must realize is that we're running through snow and ultimately others will see our tracks--and even if they don't--God does.

Since that's the case we must be brutally honest with ourselves and a few close friends. Such transparency provides a harness for our most dangerous appetites and prevents us from acting out in ways that undermine our leadership skills.

Leaders of integrity are also teachable. They are open to criticism and willing to change. They know that followers aren't looking for perfect leaders. But they do want leaders they feel are in touch with who they are and are in the process of growing themselves.