

THE BOOK

No one needs to tell you that Christian spaces right now face several crises of leadership.



What if the solution isn't a somehow less Christian form of leadership, but one more deeply tied to God himself?

ON

LEADER-

SHIP

BY KARL E. JOHNSON AND RYAN P. O'DOWD

“Creation seems to be delegation through and through. [God] will do nothing simply of Himself which can be done by creatures. I suppose this is because He is a giver.”

—C.S. LEWIS

HAVE YOU EVER experienced a truly terrific team, workplace, or church community? If so, you have benefited, knowingly or not, from effective leadership. Have you ever experienced an abusive or merely miserable workplace culture or a dysfunctional church? If so, you have suffered the byproduct of ineffective leadership.

Effective leadership does not just happen. It is a skill that requires study, training, and practice. Even our increasing awareness of leadership failures and abuses testifies to our need for leaders to call us to new and more effective and truthful ways of living and working together. As the proverbialist puts it, “When there is no prophetic vision the people perish” (Prov 29:18).

Pastors, no less than company CEOs, aspire to be effective. But as we know from research and perhaps also by experience, many pastors are more likely to feel just plain tired. Young pastors, faced with enormous demands, may get by for a season through sheer exertion. But rolling up one’s sleeves is not a strategy for sustainability. Eventually, one must transition from *doing* to *leading*.

Neither is hiring help an automatic solution. As many will attest, effectiveness remains hampered if the executive’s desk becomes a bottleneck of decision making. Simply put, the key to effective leadership is empowering others. In a church context, pastors must empower leaders and ultimately the laity.

As leaders who deeply desire to be effective, we begin with the question inherent in C.S. Lewis’s quote about delegation above: How does *God* lead his people? Although the Bible should not be reduced to a leadership text, the biblical narrative is linear — it *leads* somewhere, and behind that process is a leader. More specifically, a close study of the text reveals a variety of leadership styles.

For example, in creation, God delegates to Adam and Eve the finishing and furnishing of the world he has made, including the naming of the animals. Following the Fall, however, when his image bearers lost their way, God intervenes, providing them with more explicit instructions in the form of the Law. When that does not do the trick, and his people still must be shown the way, God provides them with prophets — Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and others — to encourage them back to faithfulness. In the incarnation, God shows the way by walking among his people. At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus speaks of handing over the keys to the kingdom — a nod to the original vision of delegating management of all creation. And at Pentecost, God empowers his people to carry on through the gift of his Spirit. Today, as we await the coming of the kingdom in its fullness, we may anticipate even greater leadership roles and responsibilities, for as Richard Bauckham writes, God’s rule “finds its fulfillment in the participation of people in [his] rule.”

From beginning to end, the consistent aim of God’s leadership is empowerment of his people. At the same time, his leadership style is adaptive — He leads in different ways depending on the circumstances. We see this same pattern on a smaller scale when we zoom in on portions of Scripture.

Take, for example, the Pentateuch. Eugene Peterson, speaking of God’s development of his people, describes Genesis as embryonic, Exodus as birth and infancy (“Do this, don’t do that”), Leviticus as childhood (complete with concrete object lessons and rituals requiring bodily participation), Numbers as adolescence (characterized by rebellion), and Deuteronomy as adulthood. Only when God’s people are finally “well educated, superbly trained, [and] extensively tested,” Peterson writes in his book *Working the Angles*, does he entrust them with the Promised Land and invite them to live responsibly in it.

In this article, we zoom in even further, focusing on God’s leadership in the book of Genesis. As God leads his people into and out of Egypt, into and out of the wilderness, and into and out of exile, we ask: What is God’s mission, and how do these movements serve his mission? Is his leadership static or dynamic? Authoritarian or laissez-faire? When does he step up and when does he step back? And what does all of this have to do with church leadership today?

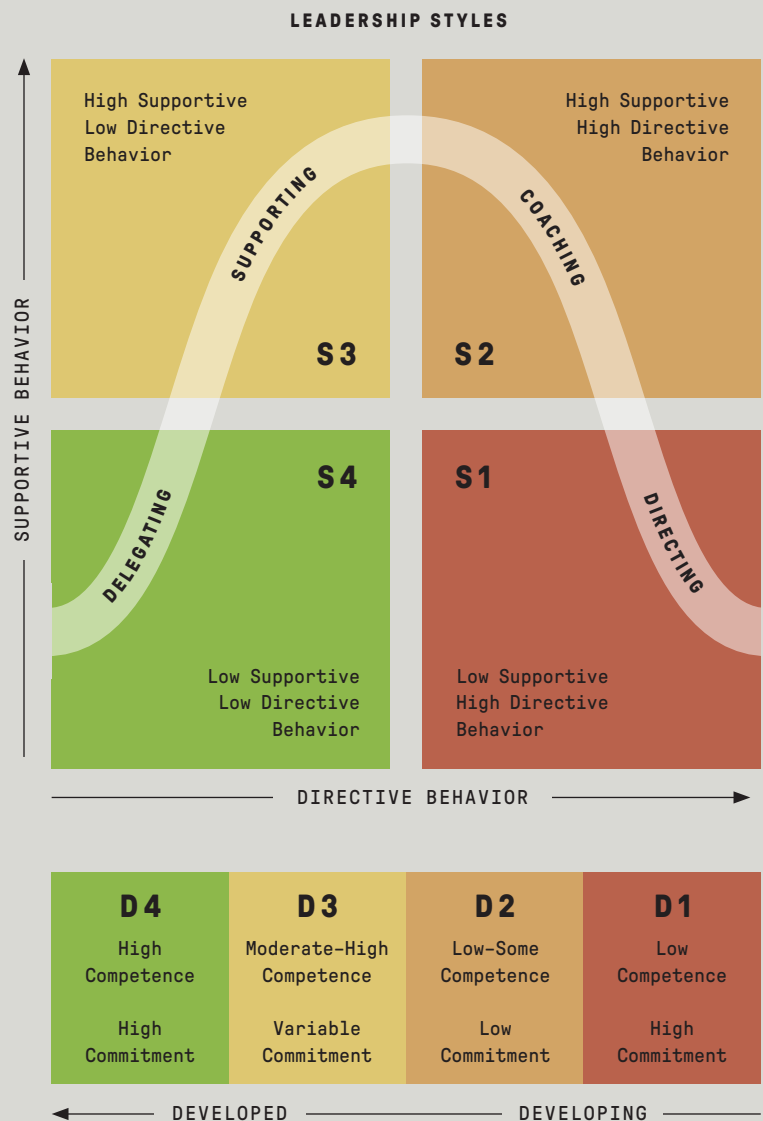
A Leadership Lens

In an effort to discern a pattern in God’s leadership, we find it helpful to look at the biblical narrative through the lens of Situational Leadership II (SLII), a model developed by management author Ken Blanchard. According to SLII, there is no single correct leadership style; leaders must adapt their style to the needs of those they lead. The best leaders partner with their people. The SLII framework consists of four leadership styles: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Situational leaders move back and forth among these styles depending on an individual’s developmental level.

- Directing:** Picture an enthusiastic beginner, eager to learn but inexperienced. They have commitment without competence, and so what they need is to be told and shown what to do and how to do it.
- Coaching:** Over time, if they become discouraged, they may rate low in both commitment and competence, in which case what they need is continued direction plus support — listening, encouraging, praising, and involvement in decision making.
- Supporting:** As an individual develops greater competence, their confidence may still be lagging, in which case the leader should be less directive but must remain close, continuing to facilitate, encourage, and provide feedback.
- Delegating:** Finally, when an individual is both competent and confident, the leader may step back, recognizing the individual’s accomplishments but providing them with plenty of freedom and room to move.

SLII® Model

Matching Leadership Style to Development Level



With this framework in mind, we will see more clearly that the God of the Bible turns out to be surprisingly adaptive — he treats different people differently according to their needs, sometimes directing, sometimes coaching or supporting, and often delegating. We also see that leadership is not only a means of effectively executing one’s mission. At its best, it’s also a form of discipleship.

In the Beginning: Delegation

The Bible is the story of God’s redemptive work in the world. He is repairing and restoring all that is broken, *but he is not going to do it all by himself*. Instead, he invites his creatures to partner with him. This turns out to be no small task; indeed, delegation is never as simple as dishing off one’s work to others. In order to effectively execute his mission, God continually equips and encourages his people. This entails a discernible process in which God turns his work over to his people gradually, with less and less specific direction over time.

Delegation is central not only to redemption but also to creation. Even before the world was in need of repair, involving his creatures in his creation is the very thing for which this world was made. God created Adam and Eve — and you and me — to share in the joy of making and managing the world with him.

Consider the very first words God spoke to his creatures. “Be fruitful and increase,” God said, “fill the earth and subdue it.” One clue to the meaning of this pregnant phrase is the setting — a garden, a place of productivity. Genesis 1 depicts God as a master gardener amidst his creative work, making heaven and earth, sun and moon, sky, sea and land, and then filling these places with plants and animals of

all kinds. He stops, rests, and like an artist or laborer looking back upon a completed project, takes great delight in all that he has made. The scene culminates with God saying “Let us make man in our image, male and female.”

So, not only is God a maker who makes things with great skill, but we are like him. J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* and one of the most creative minds of the 20th century, put it this way: “We make because we are made, and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.” God charged humanity to be fruitful and fill the earth because he made us to be like himself. He made us to be makers.

Notice that God does not issue the charge and then simply walk away. The image is rather one of apprenticeship, and what better place than a garden to learn alongside another? Take, for example, the naming of the animals. In Genesis 1, God names Adam. In Genesis 2, God says, in essence, “now you have a go.” God shows the way by modeling. It’s not hard to imagine that God’s commission to cultivate creation includes the further task of “filling” the earth with art and music, as well as works of engineering and technology.

One more thing about this seemingly simple invitation to be fruitful and fill the earth: God’s invitation to enter into his work tells us not only what to do but who we are. We imitate him in order to represent him and even to become like him. We are, quite literally, God’s delegates on earth. Already in the first two chapters of Scripture we begin to see that God’s leadership consists of more than mere technique.

REBELLION

To be sure, delegation requires trust and is no sure formula for success. Some leaders are too hands on, and some are too hands off. But the problem is not always a matter

of technique. One of the biggest obstacles to effective delegation is distrust.

Remarkably enough, when we as leaders encounter ingratitude or insubordination, we can take comfort in knowing that God can relate to us. When in Genesis 2 Adam and Eve trust the serpent rather than God, they rejected the gift and invitation to bear the very image of God. Now there is a catastrophic problem, and most of the Bible consists of working out a resolution to this problem. If, as we have said, in the beginning there was delegation, we might say the drama of the biblical narrative kicks in when that delegation goes disastrously wrong.

How should God respond? How do *you* respond in similar circumstances? Consider the options. One can ignore acts of distrust and disobedience. Or, one can permanently repossess all that has been delegated. Although such alternatives often present themselves as the paths of least resistance, over time they only contribute to a cycle of escalating distrust and further insubordination.

Instead, God punishes Adam and Eve by immediately banishing them from the garden. Why? We should neither gloss over this as if it were no big deal nor obsess over it as if it were the mean response of a vindictive God. Fortunately, there is a more compelling explanation: God’s prompt punishment was a reprimand that, like all good reprimands, had the best interest of the other in mind.

God’s discipline is a form of directive leadership. His interventions and reprimands are never mere retribution but always aim at restoration. Augustine once observed that the skins God made for Adam and Eve were both a gift to cover their shame *and* a reaffirmation of work. In a similar way, when God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, he was restarting or resetting the process of del-

egating work and witness. He was taking back the reigns of the world to confront humanity's arrogance and ignorance, all toward the end of restoring us to our work — and also to himself. The first reprimand in history was thus also the inaugural act of redemption.

If there is one thing well worth remembering about God's inclusion of human persons in making the world that serves as our home, it is this: God's original act of delegation was never merely about getting the job done. God could have completed the work much more easily by himself. In God's economy, delegation is really a function of discipleship.

Operation Turnaround: Directing

Have you ever had to navigate your way out of a mess at work? And perhaps persuade others to follow you in the process? If you serve in leadership, eventually you will.

Turnaround operations require a directive style of leadership. Mission and vision, goals and roles, skills and confidence, rewards and consequences all have to be reestablished. Only then can one again embark on the journey from directive leadership to delegation. This is exactly what we see in Genesis 12.

THE DIRECTIVE

Having failed spectacularly at self-governance, God's creatures require retraining. And in time God will provide coaching and support in the form of laws and customs to guide them, as well as prophets, priests, and kings to lead them. *But not yet.* In Genesis 12, God treats them like the incompetent beginners they are and simply tells them very specifically what to do.

In the very first verse of this important chapter, God directs Abraham to relocate. "Go from your country, your people and

your father's household to the land I will show you." Remarkably, Abraham knows neither where is going nor how long it will take to get there. That is by design. God does not explain himself. He does not expect Abraham to understand everything. He simply tells him what to do.

THE COVENANT

When things fall apart, it's wise to return to mission and vision, and in the very next verse of chapter 12, God provides direction by restating and reaffirming his original mission in the form of a covenant:

I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

Notice three leadership maneuvers in this passage:

- **First, God restates his mission.** The word "bless" appears four times in just two verses, reminding Abraham that his whole purpose is to reestablish peace and justice, wholeness and harmony, joy and intimacy.
- **Second, God reaffirms the vision of delegation.** Although he is actively intervening to get the human race back on track, he is going to bless all people *through Abraham*.
- **Third, God inspires confidence by ensuring success.** When God says "I will" three times, he is saying "my promise will be fulfilled whether or not you believe it, comply with it, or consent to it." Notice too the uncertainty — Abraham

has no idea where he is going nor how he could possibly become the father of a nation. Even in his most directive mode, God is concerned not primarily with getting stuff done but with character and relationship. He is wholeheartedly determined that this fledgling nation will be *relationally restored* to him through the exercise of trust.

RE-DIRECTING ABRAHAM

Turning our attention to God's leadership style at the beginning of this rebuilding process, we see God leading Abraham and Sarah through direct action and intervention — speech, dreams, and even angelic visitors. And in chapters 12 through 22, we also see several divine interventions that require physical action or movement. This retraining regimen is participatory, involving not just head and heart but also hands and habits. Abraham and Sarah learn by doing.

Among all the instances of God's directive leadership in the life of Abraham, the most vivid is surely the story of the sacrifice of Abraham's son, Isaac.

Imagine being in Abraham's shoes. He has been promised children and land but has neither, even though ten years have passed. Not surprisingly, he experiences doubt and frustration. "You have given me no offspring," he says to God. And with respect to the land that has been promised, he says what you or I might say: "How can I know?"

Amidst this doubt, God reassures rather than reprimands Abraham. "Look up at the sky and count the stars — if indeed you can count them," he says. "So shall your offspring be." Still, building deep trust in Abraham requires more than words. It requires action. How will God lead Abraham in this moment?

In Genesis 22, God again directs Abraham to "Go," this time "to the land of

What is the point of this complex and confounding story of Abraham raising a cleaver over his beloved son? It's all about trust. The point is precisely that God challenged Abraham to demonstrate his confidence in him. Abraham *knew* that Isaac would not die. He just didn't know *how* God would provide.

Moriah.” Abraham must have known he was still in school, for Moriah means the Lord is my teacher. The drama really kicks in when God says, “Offer Isaac as a burnt offering.”

In Abraham’s day, the cutting of an animal was the way oaths were ratified. When the parties of the agreement walked between the pieces, it was a way of saying, “If I don’t hold up my end of the bargain, may this happen to me.” The ritual ratified the agreement by dramatically enacting the consequences of breaking the oath. Remarkably, in Genesis 15, the very maker of heaven and earth submits himself to this ritual. Even more remarkably, Abraham is not required to walk between the pieces. God is telling Abraham that even if he does not hold up his end of the deal, God will pay the price for him. Simply put, God doesn’t just set up Abraham for success. He *guarantees* success.

Then comes Abraham’s final exam. The maker of heaven and earth desires to again entrust his people to manage his creation. But are they ready for the next level of responsibility?

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Conclusion

As clergy and leaders of all kinds know all too well, effectively empowering others is no simple task. Church laity, children, employees and volunteers must be provided with training of various sorts. By studying God’s leadership as we have here, we can

distill several lessons for our own work leading others.

Above all, a healthy and “high performing” church community will be characterized by confidence and trust. As we see in Genesis, this requires an ongoing process of building — and sometimes rebuilding.

Furthermore, because the competence and confidence of both individuals and communities fluctuates, leaders must be adaptive. This is precisely what we see God modeling from the opening pages of scripture. As we see in the life of Adam, he desires to share the management of his creation with his people. But as we see with Abraham, he is also prepared to intervene and give his people what they most need in any given moment.

Finally, God’s leadership reminds us not to get lost in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of our programs. Good delegation always results in cooperation, growth in our sense community, and increased generosity that is at the heart of sharing our work. ©

Editor's note: This essay is part of ongoing work by the Johnson and O'Dowd of exploring leadership characteristics from the observable work of God. In a second part, they will look at God's coaching, supporting, and delegating.