

The High Cost of Leadership

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If you're thinking about going into the front lines of battle as a leader in your fellowship, you first need to consider Jesus' parable about a king preparing for war: "Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace" (Luke 14:31-32). Waging spiritual war on your campus is no party. There will be destruction and there will be blood. If you don't have the resources to win, it could be better not to go to war at all.

I'm not saying that staff workers and student leaders are wrong to challenge younger students to think about why they should join their I-V chapter's exec, lead a Bible study or take on other responsibilities. I simply believe that those of you headed for leadership should also weigh the reasons why you shouldn't be a leader. I, for one, can think of three sets of reasons -- physical costs, emotional costs and spiritual costs.

Physical Costs

You shouldn't be a leader because it will cost you physically. For starters, it will cost you time. A small-group leader with no other responsibilities in the fellowship should probably invest about ten hours a week to do the job right -- two hours preparing for the meeting, two hours for the meeting itself (going early and staying afterward to talk), an hour with the coleader to go over the Bible study, an hour or two relating to group members one on one, a couple of hours to attend the chapter's large-group meeting, and perhaps an hour for a chapter-wide small-group leaders' meeting.

InterVarsity exec members who take their chapter and their role on exec seriously must make a similar commitment. It takes time to develop good working relationships with others on your team.

Being a leader may also cost you money. Sometimes you might buy ice cream for your small group after your meeting ends. Perhaps you'll help the person you're disciplining scrape together funds to go to an important weekend conference. You will no doubt spend money on books and other resources that will spiritually nourish you as well as those you disciple. Footing these expenses could mean not getting a new pair of Reeboks.

Emotional Costs

Second, you shouldn't be a leader because it will cost you emotionally. Walking into leadership means walking into conflict. As a student I led a small group on evangelism. My pushiness and the group members' fears led to a verbal battle during one group meeting that left me frustrated, hurt and angry. The others probably had similar feelings. If I had never led, I never would have been the center of an argument. It was a risk. And I paid.

Conflict is not always bad. It can force us to face ourselves and others honestly. But in the short term, conflict usually drains us emotionally -- and all the more so if we leaders internalize our feelings, rather than taking the initiative to approach the individuals involved.

Leading may also mean experiencing times of loneliness. Especially on campuses where leadership teams are small and the number of supportive peers are few, you may feel isolated. When others don't feel the urgency to pray or the compassion to give to the needy that you do, you'll probably feel like no one quite understands you.

You may also find that others treat you differently after you become a leader. Suddenly you are set apart as "the authority" in the Bible study. People wait for you to take initiative in relationships; and you begin to wish someone would reach out to you first for a change.

Leaders risk feeling unappreciated. How many times have you said thanks to one of your leaders for simply doing his or her job? Well, that's probably how often others will thank you. Day after day, week after week, you will give time, money and emotional energy, with no guarantee that those you lead will say, "Good job."

Finally, leaders also risk failure. You'll be handling more responsibilities, and sometimes you will blow it. Once I decided not to come to a meeting because I thought I had more important things to do. The meeting turned out to be very important. I goofed, and the feelings of failure arrived right on time. Other times Satan will badger you with feelings of failure even though you've done nothing wrong.

Spiritual Costs

Third, you shouldn't become a leader because it will cost you spiritually. Satan is not all-powerful; but he's no dummy either. He knows that if he can bump off the shepherd, the sheep will be nearly helpless. Leaders in battle are more likely to get hit by a bullet because they are out in front where the ammunition is flying. I've watched a number of campus fellowship leadership teams undergo spiritual attacks after making significant progress. Execs that put together great plans and work out relational conflicts during camp in the spring frequently experience new obstacles as school is getting started. I've seen key leaders not be able to return to school for many reasons -- money problems at home, an auto accident and so on. I believe that often these are spiritual attacks which can destroy a leadership team's effectiveness and thus weaken an entire chapter.

Many Christian leaders also experience intensified attacks of sexual temptation. A significant number of student leaders get involved in sexual activity that they know is outside God's will for them. If you are not now involved sexually with someone outside of marriage, you need to recognize that you will likely have a flesh-and-blood opportunity for it in the near future. Christian leaders cannot afford to be naive about this.

Being sexually active outside marriage not only harms us, leaving emotional scars that affect later relationships, but devastates those we lead. One I-V chapter over a period of six years had several sets of

execs involved in sexual sin. A number of times the chapter began to move and show spiritual potential. Then sexual involvement began, and the wind went out of the chapter's sails. As members of the body of Christ, our actions affect fellow believers – especially those whom God has entrusted to our spiritual care.

Furthermore, Satan will try to nurture unresolved conflict among leaders. Earlier I said that conflict can be good; I was speaking of conflicts that we resolve. If conflict festers within our leadership team, we leaders not only suffer, but the whole chapter suffers from the lack of unity and vision coming down from the top.

Perhaps the most serious attack Satan makes on us leaders is that of pride. Often leaders rise to places of responsibility because they do things well. In time they may be tempted to believe they can do no wrong -- or that even if they do, things will turn out all right. They begin to ignore the counsel of the Christian community and act more and more independent, even of God.

Gathering Your Forces

Leadership is dangerous. But in the midst of its challenges, God gives us the physical, emotional and spiritual support we need to thrive as leaders. Six key resources come to mind.

First, a regular support group can be an invaluable source of encouragement, hope, love and acceptance. As we see God work in other people's lives, he becomes visible in our own. If you are a small-group leader, your support group may be made up of other small-group leaders in your chapter. Similarly, exec members in your chapter can spend time consciously drawing together as a community, rather than just meeting to take care of business.

Second, we need accountability partners -- friends with whom we can be absolutely honest without fear of condemnation, and friends who will tell us straightforwardly what they think God may be saying to us.

Third, we should seek a rock-solid sense of God's call to the role of Christian service we are entering. When we feel weary in the midst of our leadership responsibilities, it is good to be able to recall and draw strength from a sense of God calling us to serve. We hear God's call through his Word, through the counsel of others, through the circumstances before us and through the voice of God in us. You may believe

that God is primarily calling you to lead a Bible study or work in a soup kitchen or befriend non-Christians. Perhaps God simply wants you to be a learner this year, to lay a solid foundation before you try to build your house of leadership.

Fourth, we need to obey God's command to rest. Physical fatigue makes us vulnerable to all kinds of temptations. I'm much more likely to get bossy and short with people when I'm tired. Conflict is not far to follow. Exhaustion heightens negative emotions, such as feelings of failure and loneliness. And, of course, if we're hit by loneliness, sexual temptation can be magnified.

Fifth, we need to decide ahead of time how we will handle the opportunities for sin that are presented to us. If another member of the

fellowship and I are sexually attracted to one another, we need to know ahead of time how we are going to act toward each other. If I am prone to periods of doubt, I may want to keep a list of Scripture passages on hand that help me focus on God's strength and goodness through history and in my life, as well as a phone list of Christians I can call for encouragement.

Power in Weakness

Finally, and most importantly, we must recognize our poverty before God. It may sound like a contradiction for a lack of something to be a resource. But such is the nature of our relationship with God. When we rely on ourselves, we don't allow God to give us his strength.

Even though we leaders are quick to say we are saved by grace (God's strength), not works (our strength), we act like all that changes when we're living out the Christian life. In actuality, we are just as helpless to lead a holy life without God as we were to enter into that new life in the first place. We are, as author Eugene Peterson says, spiritually bankrupt.

George led me to the Lord some years ago. But then he was hit by a rare blood cancer. For four years he and the doctors struggled with it. Nothing seemed to help. I stood by George's car one day as he told me the bad news. I was numb. But he turned to me and said, "You know, Andy, there is really no better place to be than to have to rely on God alone."

For Christian leaders the same is true. Your desire to assume leadership shouldn't stem from a belief that others will love you more (if so, their conditional love isn't worth chasing after) or that God will love you more (a lie), or that your chapter will fall apart without you (as Mordecai says to Esther in chapter four of that book, if you don't come forward to save the day, God will use someone else to do his work). Your desire to assume leadership should be rooted in the knowledge that as a leader you will be forced to rely on God alone -- and in the belief that there's no better situation to be in.

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