

Back to the burning bush: Leadership 101

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [April 24, 2002](#) issue

Leadership is all the rage at universities these days. There are courses in microleadership and macroleadership, leadership skills and leadership techniques. There are professors of leadership (some of them calling to mind the old adage “Those who can, do, those who can’t teach”) and institutes of leadership.

Students generally flock to these courses. After all, who among us doesn’t like to think of himself or herself as a potential leader? Most people hope that going to college will help them to be in charge of something some day. I know enough of “leadership studies” to realize that leaders are not necessarily born, but can be made. I know that there are such things as leadership skills, strategies and traits. Still, something in me resists “the science of leadership,” and that something may have to do with my faith.

Some time ago I was asked to speak on the “Principles of Christian Leadership” at a pastors’ school. I was flattered by the invitation, since it suggested that someone considered me a leader. I had to admit that I didn’t know much about the subject, but when has that kept me from accepting a gig?

So I read up on the new literature on leadership. Some of the books present leadership as a science, some of them characterize leadership as an art or a craft, but all of them claim to present the keys to effective leadership. I particularly liked the nuanced, historically informed book by Ron Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. That’s certainly how I’ve experienced it—without easy answers.

Then, since I would be speaking to a group of pastors, I decided to check out the Bible. The first leader who came to mind was, of course, Moses. So I searched Exodus 3 for principles of biblical leadership. I came away from my reading with the conclusion that there’s no such thing as the science or art of leadership in the Bible, at least not in Exodus. Nothing there resembles what people learn in “leadership studies.”

Exodus 3 tells the story of Moses the murderer, minding his own business, or at least his father-in-law’s sheep, in Midian. A bush bursts into flame, and a voice issues from

it. Despite Moses' innate lack of curiosity, he condescends to take a look. The voice says "Moses, Moses," thus tipping us off that this is going to be a story of call, for in the Bible, nobody seems to get called just once. To get someone's attention, God always says his name at least twice: "Samuel, Samuel," or "Saul, Saul." The call is not self-evident.

YHWH does all the talking: "I have observed the misery of my people, I have heard their cry, I know their sufferings, I have come down to deliver. . . ." The idea of deliverance is God's before it is anyone else's. All the initiative is with YHWH. But then comes a surprising turn: YHWH says, "I will send you."

It is odd that God needs someone, particularly someone as inept as Moses, to do the work. One might think that being God means having the ability to work solo. It is odd of God to pick Moses—something Moses realizes. In quick succession he lodges five objections. Moses isn't just being humble when he says that he isn't good at public speaking, theology or politics. He really doesn't have any of the skills required for liberating leadership. YHWH answers Moses' objections by promising to give him what he needs: "You shall not go empty-handed." YHWH will give Moses the words and deeds he needs to get Pharaoh's attention.

From this vignette I derive some principles of biblical leadership:

- Leadership begins in the mind of God, as a gracious inclusion of humanity into the plan and purposes of God. The roots of biblical leadership are essentially theological rather than anthropological. God's choice tells us more about the quality of God than the positive qualities of the people who are called to lead.
- The people who are called to lead are almost always the wrong people. It is almost as if God goes out of God's way to pick those who, at least on the face of it, have no virtues or qualities that suggest they would be good leaders. I'm thinking of Jacob, Sarah, Mary, Peter and Paul here, as well as of Moses. Perhaps God likes a challenge. Maybe a Creator who makes something out of nothing considers vocation a continuing aspect of creation. Any God who could make a man like Moses into a wonderful leader must be some God.
- The qualities of "good leadership" are gracious gifts of God to be gratefully received rather than skills, techniques or knowledge to be developed. When the chips are down, all biblical leaders have for credentials is faith in the promise, "I will bring you out."

It goes against our grain to conceive of leadership in this way, as the choice and work of God rather than as something we do. The vocation to lead always rests upon that primal vocation of Israel: “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors” (Deut. 7:7-8). Biblical leadership begins not in our ambition to rule or in a realistic assessment of our talents, but rather in God’s summons. As Jesus put it in “Gospel Leadership 101”: “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last . . .” (John 15:16a).

A life tethered to the leadership needs of the church can be tough. But it is also invigorating to receive the freedom and the dissonance of the called life in a world where all too many people live as if they were answerable to nothing more than their own desires.

Sometimes the call comes early (Jeremiah felt it from the womb). Sometimes it comes late, as it did for Abraham and Sarai. In saying yes to the summons, we yield to the adventure of a life free of the ideology of personal autonomy, an ideology that enslaves this culture. We are owned, commandeered for God, being used for purposes greater than ourselves.

Not long ago I saw a well-researched list of “Characteristics of Effective Pastors.” I was exhausted by this gruesome inventory of over 30 items, many of which I, after 30 years of ministry, still don’t have. Exodus 3 makes only one characteristic essential: the call and authorization of God.

Harold Quinley’s 1970s study of activist pastors set out to discover what made pastors strong, courageous and bold in leading congregations to confront the social evils of the day. Quinley concluded that a strong sense of external authorization, a sense that “I am here because I have been authorized and sent here by God and the church,” was the main source of pastoral courage. What better leadership training can we have?