Leading Without Title
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EDITOR’S NOTE: This article is adapted from Paul Seger’s new book “CHIEF: Leadership Lessons from Africa.” Paul spent his childhood in Nigeria where his parents served as pioneer missionaries. He married another MK from Africa and together they spent 17 years planting churches in South Africa.

Like every other village in northeastern Nigeria, the town of Gadaka had a chief. He was the one who granted permission for Mom and Dad to live there. He gave them the land on which to build a house. He was in charge. Nothing of any consequence went on in that village unless he gave the okay.

When we wandered close to his hut, it was obligatory to stop and greet the chief. In contrast to the round huts of the rest of the villagers, his house was rectangular and slightly larger. The distinguishing characteristic of his “palace” was the thatch-covered front porch where groups of people always seemed to congregate. Some were his cadre of servants. Others were there seeking favors. Some just hanging out. Whatever official business took place in town happened at the chief’s place and with his permission.

A village chief was a benevolent dictator. He was born into the position. Generation after generation handed down the autocratic mantle to their sons. It was a privileged position. The chief was supposed to have final authority. The villagers accepted his role, paid him homage, and submitted to his decisions.

In that remote village, away from civilization, there was structure. There was order. There was leadership.

But, this was not the only leadership in town. The chief was actually not the ultimate authority. Every village had another key player in the social structure: the medicine man. He was more witchdoctor than a medical doctor. He did not have a consulting room, but he accepted “patients” under the tree in front of his hut. His equipment was a bag full of feathers, herbs, bones, and a few dried vermin.

He did provide a version of healthcare for the village, however. A common prescription for ailments was bloodletting. This two-thousand-year-old remedy had found its way to the back regions of Africa. The tools of the trade were a homemade knife and a hollowed-out cow horn with a hole at the point. After slashing the skin, the practitioner would apply the horn and suck on the point, thus creating a vacuum that hastened the bleeding process.

His services, however, were for more than just physical problems. Villagers would seek his services to cast a spell on an enemy or to get a spell lifted. Whether you had a headache or an
enemy, the medicine man was the key player in town. The reality was that the medicine man had more influence than the chief.

Animism was the predominant worldview in this village. The people believed there was deity in everything. They “saw” gods in lightning, trees, animals, mountains, and rocks. Their greatest fear was angry demons that needed to be appeased, and only the witchdoctor could fix that. This was beyond the power of the chief.

Even though the chief was the recognized leader, it was the medicine man that had the most influence. The chief had the title, but when it came to the most important issues of life, people followed the witchdoctor. The chief had position. The witchdoctor had power.

Kenneth Blanchard puts it this way: “The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority.” [1] One of the most fundamental principles of leadership is that a title does not make you a leader. The nameplate on the office door identifies a role in the organization. It does provide a platform. It can make it possible to command and control, but it doesn’t make the resident of that room a leader.

Dictatorship is the lowest form of leadership. It could be argued that command and control is actually an absence of leadership. If you must force others, you are driving them, not leading. Like the village chief, the person in charge can demand compliance, but that is the antithesis of leadership.

My definition of leadership is: A leader is a godly servant who knows where he is going and inspires and equips others to follow. Notice that nothing is said about position. Location on the organizational chart does not make a person a leader. Sometimes a title is conferred and the leader leverages that position. He may rise to the occasion to lead if a crown is placed on his head, but the true power of a leader is not in his position. This has always been the case. It was true in the village of Gadaka, Nigeria. The people had never read a book on leadership, but they illustrated this principle every day.

Who’s Really Leading Whom?
An intriguing meeting took place between two leaders - President Clinton and Mother Teresa. She was invited to speak at the 1994 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. The President and Vice President were seated on the front row as this diminutive lady from India with no title or position began to speak.

She talked about Jesus and John the Baptist and how John leapt in the womb at the meeting of their mothers. The argument was that human life begins before birth. She made this strong statement: “I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion.” Then she went on to say that abortion was “really a war against the child, and I hate the killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that the mother can kill even her own child, how
can we tell other people not to kill one another? This is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion.” [2]

There was an awkward silence in the ballroom that erupted into a standing ovation lasting several minutes. President Clinton and Vice President Gore remained seated. It was obvious who was leading in that room.

The most powerful man in the world sat defenseless. Someone else was in charge at that moment. Mother Teresa was leading without title. Three thousand in the room followed her instead of the man with the title of President of the United States of America.

This principle is illustrated repeatedly throughout Scripture. Here are just a few of them.

For seven long years, the Midianites had ravaged the land of Israel. They would swarm in on camels, rape and pillage, and leave. The Jewish nation could not defend itself because it was severely outnumbered. In fear the citizens cowered in caves, dens, and strongholds.

Gideon was a not a person of significance. He was from the weakest clan and the youngest son of a most insignificant family in Israel, yet God picked him to be the liberator of Israel from the occupiers.

Those with title and authority did nothing to relieve the nation of the terrorists in the country, but Gideon reluctantly stepped forward. No one gave him a title. He didn’t have a military commission or status. There was no reason why he, of all people, should lead the armies of Israel—but he did. He became one of the twelve judges of Israel. We have more verses and information about Gideon than of any other judge. We are still talking about him thousands of years later.

The story of David and Goliath is a classic illustration of this principle. When David showed up at the battle front, his brothers disdained this insignificant shepherd boy and told him to get back to his sheep. They chided him for daring to lead. Perhaps it was out of embarrassment. As soldiers with position they cowered at the threats of the giant. If anyone should have led the charge against Goliath, it should have been these well-armed and well-trained professionals. Yet David stepped forward as the least credentialed person on the battlefield. He led when others fled. Thousands of years later we are still talking about David because he refused to let the absence of a title keep him from leading.

Nehemiah also proved that one does not need a position to lead. He was dispensable. His job was to taste-test the food and wine for a king, so poison intended for the king would kill him instead. He could not go lower on the food chain - no one really cared if he died - yet he was the one who led the cause of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. It was his burden, vision, and passion that catapulted him into leadership.
The twelve disciples of Jesus were the most unlikely group of men ever to be leaders of the largest initiative ever launched on planet earth. This motley group of men held no official position in Israel. They were uneducated and rough around the edges. One was an anarchist and political activist. Another was considered a traitor to his country as he collected taxes for a foreign occupier. Several were fishermen. None of them had a title. Yet God used them to initiate His work that continues 2000 years later.

The Apostle Paul also demonstrated this principle on his boat ride to Rome in Acts 27. It is almost humorous. Paul was dragged before a court with irrational accusations as his enemies sought to get rid of him. It was either an act of desperation or a smooth move when he used his citizenship to his own advantage and appealed to Caesar. That earned him a free trip to Rome, but it was no Mediterranean cruise. He was a prisoner in chains. There was no one on that boat lower in the organizational chart than Paul. Yet, when Paul spoke, people listened. They acted. Repeatedly, Paul called the shots - and even the Captain acquiesced. Paul proved that leadership does not require a position.

The penultimate example of leadership without position was Jesus. He of course had position, the highest position in the universe since He was God. But few in His day understood that and He held no title. He was born in poverty to unknown and insignificant parents. His name did not show up on the official political and religious leadership organizational charts. He grew up in the forgotten village of Nazareth. Worked as a laborer. Lacked academic qualifications. No title. No portfolio. But no one could contest His ability to lead. It drove the establishment crazy. They couldn’t process the idea that someone outside their structures could gather so many followers.

He was so effective that they eventually plotted his death. The Apostle John reports: “So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus” (John 12:10-11). The religious leaders were jealous of His success. It is amazing that spiritual leaders would think this way. It would be expected that common criminals and hit men would plot assassinations. But certainly this is not the demeanor of religious folk.

We could never imagine deacons and elders plotting the death of their pastor. These were the men who were supposed to lead the nation toward God. Here was the problem: they were watching their empire being eroded by an outsider with no portfolio. Obviously, Jesus was an incredibly effective leader.

**Conclusion**

All the above stories illustrate my premise: *you do not need a position or title to lead*. Head back to the village of Gadaka in northeastern Nigeria. Who was the true leader of that town? The “name-plate” on the chief’s hut said one thing, but the villagers still headed down the path to the medicine man for the really important decisions in life. Understanding this concept leads us to a couple of key principles.
If you have the title, don’t assume you are the leader. It is a pitiful sight to watch a henpecked husband insist that he is the leader in the home. It is sad to watch a young, inexperienced “leader” demand authority. It is even worse to live under the heavy hand of an autocratic dictator. Don’t assume that your position on an organizational chart means anything. The person who just received the promotion may have the organizational clout, but that is totally different from being a leader.

If you are without a title, don’t assume that you can’t lead. Forget about position; rather seek to impact others. Don’t seek advancement; rather find ways to serve others. Someone else may get the next job promotion, but that does not limit your leadership potential. The politics of your organization or business may be controlled by the powerbrokers, but ultimately, you don’t need to be an insider to exercise leadership.

This principle shows up often in the church world. The assumed leader of a church is the pastor. Right or wrong, we ascribe expectations to this role because of the title. He is the one up front. He is the person with the office and the authority, yet there is often a power broker in the congregation. Sometimes he is on the elder or deacon board. Sometimes he silently functions as the godfather figure. Everyone looks for his nod of approval before taking a position. This individual has often been responsible for hiring or firing a pastor. He controls in spite of his lack of position.

On a more positive side, it is possible for anyone in the church to be a leader. Anyone who has the moral character will emerge as the “go to” person when there are serious issues at stake. The young married couple with relational challenges will seek out those who demonstrate a healthy marriage. The person who evangelizes will automatically be viewed as a spiritual parent. The individual who genuinely cares for others will be elevated as an example. The effective teacher will be given a class. The proactive servant will be recognized.

This principle twists the entire paradigm of how things get done. This was the first lesson from my village in Africa: Leadership is not a position.

END NOTES