

The background is a solid red color. Numerous thin, light-colored arrows radiate from the edges towards the center, creating a sense of focus and direction. The arrows are arranged in a circular pattern, with some pointing directly at the center and others pointing towards the inner edges of a central circle.

# THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY TO LEAD

DISCOVER THE HEART OF GREAT LEADERSHIP

**PERRY NOBLE**

FOREWORD BY JOHN C. MAXWELL

## **The Most Excellent Way to Lead**



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**PERRY NOBLE**



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# FOREWORD

ALL MY LIFE, IT'S BEEN MY GOAL TO ADD VALUE TO PEOPLE. For almost forty years, the primary way I've done that is by communicating about leadership. It is my passion because I believe that everything rises and falls on leadership.

When you help a person become a better leader, you help all the people that leader impacts. There are few things more rewarding than seeing leaders changed by being challenged, inspired, and equipped to grow, and then seeing them make a positive impact in their companies, churches, families, and communities.

Two decades ago, I taught leadership primarily in church environments. At that time, one of my personal goals was to help one thousand pastors to grow their churches beyond one thousand people in weekly attendance.

In 1999, after teaching a conference targeted at helping pastors to reach this milestone, I received a letter from a young man who informed me that he was planting a church, and he wanted me to know that he desired to be one of the pastors who would one day reach a thousand. He told me that he'd listened to my leadership lessons on tape, read my books, and felt as if my teaching had

set him up to be successful. That young pastor's name was Perry Noble.

In the fall of 2002, I received another letter from Perry. He wanted me to know that his church had broken the one-thousand barrier in attendance, and he graciously thanked me for being influential in his life.

What a rewarding moment that was. Having the opportunity to add value and help a leader in some small way is the reason I write books, host conferences, and speak at events.

Imagine my surprise when less than a year later I received another letter from Perry. This time he let me know that his church had reached two thousand. And he again expressed gratitude for all the leadership resources my company and I had created, which were helping him to grow.

Five months after that, I received another letter. His church attendance had reached three thousand people.

At this point I asked my assistant, Linda, to write this young man to let him know I had read the letters, was proud of him, and would love to have lunch with him sometime. He must have called Linda the same day, because it wasn't long before I saw a lunch appointment with him on my calendar.

When I arrived for lunch, Perry was waiting for me, pen and notebook in hand. Oftentimes when I meet with young leaders, they talk a lot about themselves and try to impress me with their knowledge and achievements. That wasn't the case with Perry. Instead, he impressed me with his *questions*. For two and a half hours, he picked my brain.

That day, I mostly tried to give him the benefit of my experience and the lessons I'd learned from my mistakes. But I also gave him a couple of assignments and told him I would be happy to have lunch with him again sometime.

A month later, Perry e-mailed Linda with a description of what I had asked him to do, what he had done, and the results he had seen. And there was a request for another lunch.

I have no idea how many times I've met with Perry over the last decade, but every time I do, I'm rewarded by hearing about his follow-through—and seeing the growth of his church. (He still writes me to say thank you every time he reaches another one thousand people. And he recently texted me to say that sixty thousand people attended his church one weekend!)

But what's most remarkable is that as Perry and his church have grown, his hunger to learn has actually increased. And so has his desire to help people and add value to them.

Perry has been an exceptional student and practitioner of leadership. And that's why I'm delighted to present this book to you. Everything I know about leadership I've learned from the Bible. The same is true for Perry, so everything he teaches in this book is rock solid and highly practical. Perry's reading of 1 Corinthians 13 and his application of it to leadership is insightful, encouraging, and heartfelt. It will help you become a better leader. And that will help you fulfill God's calling on your life, because everything rises and falls on leadership.

So turn the page. You're going to enjoy this journey.

*John C. Maxwell*



## INTRODUCTION

# BEFORE YOU READ THIS BOOK, *PLEASE* READ THIS

I'M A BIBLE GUY. I'm a pastor. I'm a leader.

But I didn't start out that way. In fact, quite the opposite: in high school, I was voted least likely to succeed. With my extreme procrastination, my habit of doing the least amount of work possible, and my lack of commitment, I was the guy who made the top half of my class possible.

My leadership journey began in 1991, when I was hired to be a part-time youth pastor at a small church in Pickens, South Carolina. I had no idea what I was doing, no idea how leadership worked. Then, the weekend before my first day, both the senior pastor and the music director resigned . . . which left me as the only staff member in the entire church the first Sunday I was there.

Talk about being thrown into the fire!

But looking back now, I can see how much I learned in that church.

I learned that the best leaders don't have titles, but they do have a voice people want to listen to.

I learned that different people respond to different styles of leadership and that what works for one person doesn't work for all.

I learned that there's a difference between great leadership and control or manipulation.

There was one Sunday in particular when these lessons started to come into focus for me.

I'd been asked to teach the senior men's Sunday school class, which was comprised of men sixty-five and up. I wasn't very popular with these guys; after all, I was the young buck who was allegedly trying to change everything in "their" church.

My first response to this request was "No, thank you." However, it wasn't long before I found out this wasn't actually a request.

I was assured that this would be a piece of cake. There was a Sunday school lesson book, and all I had to do was show up, teach the lesson, pray, and then leave.

All week leading up to my first teaching session, I put off preparing for the class; after all, if I just had to read the book, I figured I'd have zero challenges.

On Saturday night, I finally forced myself to sit down with the study book, and when I turned to the date of the lesson I was supposed to teach, I nearly went into cardiac arrest.

The title of the lesson was "Sex"!

I was barely nineteen years old, and I had the responsibility of teaching a group of senior adult men about sex.

I prayed for God to take my life! What in the world would I say to a group of men who had forgotten more about sex than I even knew?

I couldn't have known at the time that this event would serve as a turning point for me in my leadership at the church.

That Sunday morning, I walked into class, opened with a prayer, and told them I noticed the lesson I was supposed to teach was about sex. With a laugh, I said, "I'm sure there's nothing I can teach you guys about sex, and I'm not even going to try!"

They laughed, and I continued.

“What I would like is for you guys to tell me a little bit about you, how you came to Christ, and how you began attending this church.”

There were about eight or nine men in the class, and I listened to their stories and paid attention to what they had to say. After that “sex talk” with the senior-adult men in the church, their opinion of me did a 180. They no longer saw me as the young rebel trying to ruin what they’d worked so hard for, and I no longer saw them as the old men who were unwilling to change.

Leadership isn’t about lecturing people—it’s about listening to them, understanding where they’re coming from, and showing that you care.

After a few years in Pickens, I was offered a job at a church that was about two miles from the college I was attending. I was there for more than six years, during which time I served as the youth pastor, the children’s pastor, the college pastor, and the worship pastor, plus a few other titles. I described myself as the “minister of miscellaneous.”

But tension in this church existed between the senior adults and me. (Anyone see a pattern here?) They were convinced I was trying to hijack their church, and I was convinced they were stuck in their ways.

The senior pastor came to me one day and told me that something had come up in his schedule, and he wouldn’t be able to drive a group of senior adults to their “senior-adult convention” at the beach. He needed me to drive them (six hours one way) and make sure they were taken care of.

Talk about Daniel in the lions’ den!

I told him I didn’t want to.

He said I didn’t have a choice.

I told him that was not in my job description.

He told me to please go back and read the sentence that said, “Other duties as assigned by the senior pastor.”

So I did it . . . and it turned out to be one of the best leadership experiences of my life.

The first hour of the drive was intense because, as I said, these people were not too fond of me. However, over time, the walls between us started to come down. We began having meaningful conversations, and a level of understanding was established.

By the end of the trip, these senior adults were some of my best friends at the church. They formed what I secretly referred to as the senior-adult mafia and refused to let any other senior adult bad-mouth me.

In my time at that church, I learned that the only way I could become a great leader was by submitting to the leadership I was serving under.

I learned that leaders aren't those who make declarations but rather those who are willing to serve others and do whatever it takes to turn a vision into a reality.

I learned that if I'm the smartest person in the room, then I'm in the wrong room, because I need to constantly surround myself with people who are smarter than I am.

In the fall of 1999, I founded NewSpring Church. We started with fifteen people in a living room, no employees, no budget. But we did have a vision to create a church that would reach people far from God and teach them how to follow Jesus step-by-step.

Today we have nineteen campuses across the state of South Carolina, and we reach an average of thirty-five thousand people each weekend. Our organization operates on a \$50 million budget with more than four hundred staff members.

So why has the church taken off like this?

I believe it has a lot to do with leadership—not necessarily my leadership, but the leadership of those around me and the lessons I’ve learned from other leaders along the way.

My reason for sharing this is not to boast. I’m not one of those natural leaders who was the high school class president or who rose to the top of his graduating class in college. I took remedial classes in grade school and made a 790 on my SAT. Almost everything I’ve learned about leadership has come through firsthand experience—with some successes but even more failures.

The principles in this book aren’t just theory for me; they aren’t ideas I came up with and then wrote down but haven’t actually done. They’ve all been tested in the fires of real life, with real people. I believe these truths are timeless, and they work for anyone in any situation. More than that, I believe they will change you, as well as whatever group of people you happen to lead.

When people talk about leadership, they often use words like *vision*, *boldness*, and *influence*. But I think the heart of great leadership lies elsewhere. The most excellent way to lead has nothing to do with the number of followers you have on social media or how big your office is or how much money you get paid. True leadership is about living for something greater than yourself.

And the place I’ve learned the most about leadership is from a source that might surprise you: a Bible chapter that you’re more likely to hear at a wedding than in a conference room.<sup>1</sup>

I should give a warning right from the beginning: the most excellent way to lead is also the most difficult. It goes against our

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<sup>1</sup> If you aren’t a Christian or if you have problems with sections of the Bible, let me say right up front that I’m honored you would read this book. I use a lot of biblical examples on these pages, and my hope is that by the end, you’ll understand the Bible a little more clearly and see that this book points to Jesus, the greatest Leader of all time. (Think about it: He never even wrote a book, traveled more than one hundred miles from His hometown, led an army, or ran for public office, yet today there have been more books written about Him and more art done in His name than any other person in history.)

natural tendencies and the culture we live in, and it highlights the fact that leadership is ultimately not about the leader. However, this upside-down model of leadership isn't just biblical; it's also the most effective and most rewarding way to lead.

Whether you're an entrepreneur, a receptionist, a midlevel manager, or a new parent, I hope this book will encourage you to see every opportunity in life as a chance to lead in the most excellent way.

## SUMMARY STATEMENTS

- **The best leaders don't have titles, but they do have a voice people want to listen to.**
- **The most excellent way to lead is also the most difficult.**
- **Leaders aren't those who make declarations but rather those who are willing to serve others.**
- **Leaders do whatever it takes to turn a vision into a reality.**

***#BestWayToLead***



## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A LEADER?

I LOVE TO SHAG, and if you've ever done it, I'm sure you love it too.

I once hired a guy onto our staff who had moved to South Carolina from the northeastern part of the United States.

During one of our early conversations, he was trying to figure out more about the area, and he asked me what people in our community do for fun.

I told him that a lot of people like going to the lake, hiking, fishing, or playing golf. But then I said something that caused him to look at me like someone had punched him in the throat: "And a lot of people around here love to go out in groups and shag."

Silence—dead silence.

My new employee looked at me like I had lost my dang mind.

So I felt the need to continue to explain how awesome shagging is.

"A lot of people in our church shag."

His jaw dropped.

“I’m not that good of a shagger myself,” I continued, “but my wife took shagging lessons in college, and she’s really good at it.”

At this point he thought he’d agreed to work for one of the most perverted pastors in the country!

I should let you know that in South Carolina, our state tree is the palmetto, our state bird is the Carolina wren . . . and our state dance is called the shag, which after my conversation with my new staff member, I learned means something different in other parts of the world.

This exchange with my staff member reminded me of something a friend had told me years ago: “Words don’t have meanings; people have meanings.” So when we say certain words or phrases, they may mean something completely different to the person we’re talking to than they do to us.

Based on my twenty-five years as a leader, I think there’s no word more often misunderstood than *leadership*.

That’s not because there’s a lack of information. New books come out on the topic every year, and new blog posts pop up every day. I recently came across an article from CNN about the qualities that make a good leader. The article featured input from various leadership experts, and it’s amazing how many different opinions are out there. The list included twenty-three attributes, some of which included confidence, vision, and influence.

Let’s take a look at the following three viewpoints on leadership, just for starters.

I have a hunch many people would agree that leadership equals confidence, and I think there’s some truth to that.

A leader has to be able to make tough decisions.

A leader has to be willing to go against popular opinion.

However, while confidence is important, I don’t believe it’s the most excellent way to lead.

Joseph Stalin was confident. He made tough decisions. But because his confidence was self-centered and cruel, millions of people lost their lives. Or consider Pharaoh, the leader of Egypt who was so stubbornly confident about his own power that he allowed his people to suffer under ten plagues (see Exodus 7–11). He was confident, but he certainly wasn't great.

People may also argue that leadership equals vision—and again, I believe that's true to a certain extent.

Leaders have to be able to focus on a task with a laser-like intensity to avoid getting distracted by things of lesser importance. And not only do they have to have a clear vision themselves but they also have to be able to communicate that vision to the team.

The trouble is that visionary leadership apart from the proper focus can result in disaster. Adolf Hitler was a visionary. He had a clear plan, and he refused to allow anything to distract him from carrying it out. However, since his goal was rooted in evil and self-centeredness, the world experienced one of the worst atrocities in history—the Holocaust.

In Jesus' day, the religious leaders, the Pharisees, had a very focused vision. The problem was that they were so worried about their own legalistic rules and their positions of power that they made an enemy out of Jesus, the Messiah they were supposed to be waiting for.

Some people think that true leaders simply have the gift of influence.

When people think of leaders, they look for the people who walk into a room and have what I call the "it factor"—the ability to get a group of people to catch their vision and follow them. If leaders don't have influence, then they won't be effective long term.

A leader has to be able to produce passion in people and compel them to action.

A leader has to be able to unify a group of people who may not have much in common besides the goal they're trying to achieve.

However, while I believe influence is essential for leadership, I don't think it's the best way to lead.

Bernie Madoff had influence—so much that he was able to convince thousands of people to invest in his Ponzi scheme to the tune of \$65 billion. Until his world came crashing down in 2008, he was one of the most respected financial experts in the world. He was highly influential, but I have a hunch no one today would call him a great leader.

So if great leadership is not defined by confidence, vision, and influence, as most of the world would say, then what is the most excellent way to lead?

It's simple: the most excellent way is leadership by love.

## A COUNTERCULTURAL STYLE OF LEADERSHIP

Hold on—don't throw this book across the room. I know this sounds countercultural and maybe even a little touchy-feely, but I promise I won't ask you to sit in a yoga pose around a campfire while you share your deepest feelings with your team.

This isn't just some idea I came up with one night after eating a Meat Lover's pizza with extra cheese and having a weird dream. The place I get this idea from is the Bible. More specifically, from a guy named Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament.

Paul was an excellent leader. He started at least fourteen churches (possibly more) at a time when the church was less popular than it is today. In Paul's day, church wasn't merely a social gathering but a place where people who followed Christ came together, knowing it could cost them their lives if they were caught doing so.

If you've ever started a business or a ministry or any kind of

organized group, you know the challenges associated with building something from the ground up. And there was Paul, starting churches all over the Mediterranean rim with no technology, no leadership books, and no apps on his smartphone.

One of the churches Paul founded was in a place called Corinth. He wrote letters to the church there, and we have two of them recorded in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 12, the emphasis of Paul's writing to the church is on spiritual gifts, leadership, and the importance of working together. In 1 Corinthians 14, he continues this line of reasoning as he encourages leaders to sound a clear call for their followers.

But right in the middle of these two chapters we find 1 Corinthians 13. It's a short section (just thirteen verses), tucked between these two leadership chapters. At first glance, these words seem to be more like advice for newlyweds than instructions for the conference room. The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is, after all, commonly known as the "love chapter," and if you've ever attended a Christian wedding ceremony, you've likely heard a verse or two quoted from it.

For years, the placement of this chapter puzzled me.

It seemed like Paul was writing about leadership, and then he paused and thought, *Hmm, maybe I should write something Christians can use in their wedding ceremonies one day!* After he penned 1 Corinthians 13, he picked up the subject of leadership again and continued to talk about it in chapter 14.

But the Bible wasn't originally separated by chapters and verses (those were added later to help people find certain Scripture passages). Once I had that realization, it hit me like a brick in the face: 1 Corinthians 13 is primarily a chapter on how to lead, not how to have a great marriage.

In 1 Corinthians 12:31, Paul says, “I will show you the most excellent way.”

The most excellent way to what?

To be a great person?

To be a great spouse?

To be a great date?

I don’t believe so. Paul is continuing his discussion about leadership here, and when he says he’s going to show you the most excellent way, I believe he’s saying, “I will show you the most excellent way to lead.”

I guarantee that the principles from 1 Corinthians 13 will help you become a better leader.

It doesn’t matter if you’re a single mother trying to lead your family, a student organizing a group of people to fight for a cause, an entrepreneur trying to get a start-up off the ground, a pastor trying to lead your church, or a CEO leading a business—if we practice leadership by love, we will become leaders other people actually want to follow.

Let’s take a look at the first few verses from this chapter through the lens of leadership:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, *but do not have love*, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, *but do not have love*, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, *but do not have love*, I gain nothing.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3 (EMPHASIS ADDED)

Make no mistake about it: loving others is a really big deal—not just in personal relationships but also any time there is a leader-follower relationship. Most people think love should be left out of the workplace and other leadership settings, but as this passage shows . . . love is more important than casting great vision, being extremely intelligent, or even working hard for a cause.

The way we look at other people is important—and when we see them through the lens of love, our capacity to lead significantly increases.

## LEARNING FROM THE BEST

Jesus was the most excellent leader who ever lived. He was once asked which of the commandments was the most important, and this was His response:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

MATTHEW 22:37-40

“Love God; love others,” He said—and notice that He didn’t separate the two. If we want to be excellent leaders, then loving other people is not optional. It isn’t something we do only on the days it comes naturally or when we feel like it.

Loving people isn’t easy.

People will hurt you.

They will disappoint you.

They will turn on you.

They will gossip about you.

They will fight you.

Leadership by love doesn't sound sexy on the surface, but it's the most effective—and most rewarding—way to lead in the long term.

When it comes down to it, people don't need a flashy leader who can quote inspirational lines or has the most carefully constructed vision statement or has the charisma to charm a bunch of followers. They need someone who cares enough about them to come alongside them and help them become the best version of themselves they can be.

They need someone who guides them with patience and kindness, without insecurity or vanity. They need someone who helps them climb higher through grace and honesty, who takes bullets for mistakes, who gives the benefit of the doubt. They need someone who offers hope when others won't, who perseveres when others don't. In short, they need a leader who loves.

Those who lead through love don't just change the culture they're in; they change the world.

## SUMMARY STATEMENTS

- **The most excellent way to lead is leadership by love.**
- **If we practice leadership by love, we will become leaders other people actually want to follow.**
- **Loving others is a big deal—not just in personal relationships but also anytime there is a leader-follower relationship.**
- **Love is more important than casting great vision, being extremely intelligent, or even working hard for a cause.**

*#BestWayToLead*