

"I view leadership transitions as the most important decision a servant-leader needs to address. Neil has a gift both for creative illustrations and focusing on the subjects every leader locally or globally would be wise to consider and reflect on. You probably will make some changes."

—**Eddie Waxer, leader, pioneer
The Sports Movement**

"I'm so glad that Neil Hart has written this timely book at a moment of so much structural change around the world, addressing one of the most important aspects of successful leadership: transition and succession. I'm particularly glad that he has focused especially on the greatest leader of all time, the Lord Jesus Christ. It's important to find methodologies and models (surprisingly rare) for leadership transition that avoid two common extremes: on one hand, the leader who refuses to relinquish control and becomes a cork in the bottle; and on the other hand, the leader who leaves quickly and carelessly, leaving the organization feeling abandoned or even orphaned. This book can help you to navigate the life-giving middle path."

—**Pete Greig, 24-7 Prayer International
and Emmaus Road Church**

"Neil's book has many excellent examples of leaders who have done well in succession. These examples give a clear path of success in contrast to so many efforts at succession that end in failure. Moreover, I love Neil's emphasis on building a broad culture of people-building so that succession is more natural and organic than simply creating a specific 'succession plan' for only a few key individuals to replace a few key individuals. If we can shape a pervasive culture of generational succession across our churches and organizations, then specific leadership succession will occur in a much more natural and effective way."

—**Malcolm Webber, PhD, Founder and
Executive Director, LeaderSource SGA**

"I hope you aren't on a diet because this treatise on succession is high in caloric content. Neil Hart pulls off the trifecta, poignantly sharing from personal experience, insightfully interviewing transitioned leaders, and all the while keeping it brief. Being in transition myself, I've read half a dozen books on the subject, and Neil's is by far the most usable."

—**Roy Moran, Founder, Shoal Creek Community Church**
Author of *Spent Matches: Igniting the Signal Fire for the Spiritually Dissatisfied*

"Like leaders themselves, books on leadership come and go but few address, to any significant degree, the complex nuances of career transition. Fewer still discuss the practical realities of organizational departure. In fact the truth is, accounts of leadership succession are hard to find—and good ones are even harder. Here we are in luck. What Neil Hart presents in this book is a biblically grounded experiential view not only of how to exit an organization but also how to exit it well. Drawing upon the wisdom of key leaders across a range of sectors, Hart synthesizes biographical narrative, interview data, and informed commentary in order to address a series of questions that all leaders need to think about at some time or another, but which the vast majority think about far too late. What transpires is a compelling treatise on the importance of succession planning that is a must-read for Christian leaders both in church and nonchurch contexts."

—**Andrew Parker, Professor, Ridley Hall, Cambridge, UK**
Director, Andrew Parker Consulting Limited, UK

THE
Magnificent
EXIT

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*Mastering the Art of
Leadership Transitions*

NEIL HART

The Magnificent Exit: Mastering the Art of Leadership Transitions

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FOREWORD

Neil Hart's broad experience as a business entrepreneur, leadership of global mission teams, and extensive repositioning of the Mergon Foundation (which resulted in it being recognized as the "Africa partner of choice" for noted international foundations) all ably equipped him to write this book on leadership transitions.

Among the plethora of present-day writing, I found Neil's approach to be engagingly compelling, with a refreshingly insightful perspective in challenging the reader's view on leadership and power. Readers will appreciate his succinct and clear reasoning in favor of servant-leadership, which is supported by his many credible examples of global kingdom leaders whose practice of Christ's leadership teachings are inspirational.

Neil and I have a shared interest in certain leadership outcomes. Management is so often characterized by the abuse of power and disrespecting the ability of others. The Father has shaped my beliefs about the restrictive influence that unwarranted centralized control will invariably have on a leader, a leader's team, and on overall organizational development and performance. Pronounced examples of the latter throughout my career have given me a tendency to be "power averse," although the golden rule is to find and maintain an effective balance.

A book's influence relates to whether the author succeeded in materially changing a reader's own views. In this case, Neil's book brought several of my own beliefs into sharper biblical context and

enhanced my paradigm on the role of a steward—the archetypical servant leader. Neil’s reasoning and hypotheses are based on the solid foundation that God is the source of all power. Indeed, all power is God’s, and redistribution and application from that source represent the core duty of anyone worthy of serving as his steward. A steward can never be the owner and only uses power on behalf of that owner—which, of course, is God. The value and relevance of this book will remain for as long as this godly context is honored by those individuals who are entrusted with authority.

Francois van Niekerk
Founder, Mergon Group
Author of *Doing Business with Purpose*

INTRODUCTION

The Leadership Vacuum

When I was nine years old, I played my first football match as captain of our small-town team of children nine and under. It was a proud moment for my parents—but not so for me. We were thoroughly thrashed by the opposition, but that was not my key take-away from the outing. What I recall most vividly from that fateful day was standing on the field in the center position behind a losing and demoralized team, desperately searching within myself for what a captain should do in this situation and coming up short.

Being asked to play an important role without anyone preparing me for how to do it made me feel dreadfully alone. The team suffered, and so did our record-for-loss margins for the year—not to mention my ego! What I experienced was the result of a *leadership vacuum*: the poor or nonexistent preparation for young, up-and-coming leaders. This was not unique to our young team. It is a global challenge that occurs in businesses, churches, sports teams, nonprofit organizations, and the like. We not only have a vacuum of leaders, but we also have existing senior leadership that does not seem to know how to identify, prepare, and release leaders at the correct timing for organizational health. I have a fair share of failure in this area—and a little success.

Over the years, I have led in various roles since my big under-nine debut: from being a lieutenant in the army, to a CEO in business, to church leadership, to a senior leader of a multinational

missions organization, and now a hybrid environment that crosses business and ministry at Mergon Foundation. In every area, I have seen a leadership vacuum. Over the years, I have discussed this problem with seasoned leaders who have had similar experiences. As a result, they urged me to write this book about this leadership challenge. Although I have written it with an eye for ministry leadership, it is not only for such leaders. These principles apply in every area of leadership.

In preparation for this book, I interviewed multiple leaders so I could learn beyond my own experience. I specifically chose to dialogue with heads of large multinational nonprofit organizations whom I estimate, collectively, have had direct influence into all 195 countries in the world. Throughout this book, I have attempted to capture several of these conversations to strengthen the quality and diversity of the content.

Probably even more importantly, I have studied Jesus' approach. He was a maverick and a revolutionary. He did not conform to the wisdom of the culture but instead demonstrated unique techniques to identify, raise up, and then release leaders. In my view, there has been no other leader—secular or spiritual—who comes close to his success in changing the world.

Leadership affects us all. We can support it, run from it, or criticize it, but leadership is a huge part of how our world works. In fact, we see throughout the Bible that God primarily intervenes into the human condition through leadership. Over the years, I have become (perhaps morbidly) fascinated with the fallout from bad leadership. There is so much of it out there. But my particular specialty has been to take a closer look at leadership handoff: the transition from one senior leader to an upcoming leader or team. This is by far the place of the most inertia or inactivity.

Like a black hole in space, a botched leadership handoff sucks in the outward energy of the organization away from its mission and focuses it instead on the inward task of trying to keep that

organization healthy. This halts its forward progress, whether momentarily or permanently, because leaders failed to understand that their role was for a season only and that for the sake of the next generation, they needed to plan well for the next leader to go beyond them. The word *vacuum* stems from the Latin adjective *vacuus*, which gives us “vacant” or “void.” In this case, I see a leadership vacuum as the space devoid of younger leadership that exists in organizations between the senior leadership and those closer to the ground. So, we have two critical problems: the inertia created by poor leadership handoff, and the vacuum created by a lack of vision for leadership development. This book is about both of these.

Lastly, I tried to write a short book—mainly because I want you to read it all the way through and I know your time is limited. I have tried to make the points clear and concise in the hope that they will provide value to you in your role as a leader. My greatest delight would be that something in this book impacts your heart and makes a difference not only to you but also to the health of your organization and to those who will take over from you one day. Our time on this planet is short, and we have much work to do.

Neil Hart
Stellenbosch
South Africa

THE MAGNIFICENT EXIT

Serving the Godly Vision in Others

Picture the scene: Passover is near, and things are really heating up in Jerusalem. The city is abuzz with travelers who have come from far and wide to celebrate the feast. Jesus, fresh from raising Lazarus from the dead (an astounding miracle that's caused quite a stir in the region), has just entered Jerusalem. The streets are full of palm branches and shouts of "Hosannah!" Pharisees are plotting in dark alleyways. Almost everyone is caught up in the confusion and divided in opinion. Jesus discloses to his disciples that he is about to be betrayed and killed but that he would rise again on the third day. The city's atmosphere is charged with equal measures of wonder, bewilderment, expectation, and pandemonium. The history of the world was about to be divided into two distinct pieces: all that came before Jesus and everything that will come after him.

In the midst of these moments of upheaval—just before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane—Jesus chooses to teach his followers one of the deepest truths. In John 13–17, Jesus explains to his disciples that he is leaving but that he will send the Holy Spirit, that he is the way to the Father, and that the disciples should abide in him, the true vine. Then he prays his "high priestly prayer" to the Father, saying, "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do" (17:4).

It was in this setting that Jesus gave possibly his greatest leadership lesson. The Lord of life itself, come to redeem all humanity

and inaugurate the coming kingdom of God, here chose to teach the principle of servant-leadership. The healthy multiplication of his church depended on it. Jesus knew that in the coming years, the expansion of the gospel would be led by a few men and women, and he needed them to understand how to lead well during the turbulent times they were about to step into—not just to lead well, but also to rapidly multiply obedience to his teaching through individuals, households, towns, and countries. He was determined that his words should reach to the ends of the earth. Those who heard his teachings were to obey these truths so that they could then teach others to do the same—family to family, city to city, from one ethnic group to another and from generation to generation.

In order to exert this level of influence, Jesus demonstrated a method of leadership that came from a place none of his followers expected when he humbled himself as servant. In John 13, Jesus and his disciples sat down to their final meal together. Before they ate, however, Jesus removed his outer garment and began to wash their feet. John writes, “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (v. 3). Jesus had been given all authority by the Father over *everything*. In other words, in this moment, Jesus carried more power than anyone else in the universe, yet he chose to take on the role of a servant among his disciples, whom he now called friends. This was not a moment of weakness; it was a moment of unimaginable strength.

How do you think the disciples responded? The same way people would respond today if a perceived greater person wanted to wash a lesser person’s feet—in shock! Peter says something like, “No way! You’ll never wash my feet!” Jesus then made this stunning statement: “Unless I wash you, you have no part in me” (v. 8); and then later, “I have set you an example that you should do just as I have done for you” (v. 15).

After three years of companionship, travels, miracles, teachings, casting out demons, and healing the sick together—the miles walked, the meals shared, and the deep conversations had—he creates an ultimatum moment, leaving them with the example of serving as the lowliest of servants. I believe that Jesus was not only interested in the transformation that came from incredible teachings, nor was he only interested in the evangelism of his gospel for that generation. Jesus was particularly interested in the multiplicative growth that would come from his team's influence and, far more importantly, he was concerned for how leadership would be handed off from individual to individual. The “how” seemed to be critical to Jesus. He didn't just come for twelve people; he came for the world.

Jesus' strategy was quite different from any of the options I might have considered in a time of transition. Instead of hiring the most prominent PR agency, renting a flashy building, writing a bestselling book, or broadcasting a creative brand message through mass media, he simply chose to invest himself deeply in his selected disciples and then teach them the importance of reinvesting themselves in others who would likewise invest in others (2 Tim. 2:2). He knew that if they continued to do this, at some point the good news of the gospel would inevitably reach the ends of the earth. Over two thousand years later, we are witnesses that this was a phenomenal leadership strategy!

Jesus knew that having invested *in* them, he now needed to invest *through* them. This is critical to all leadership, which asks a question that is almost never asked in any other context: *How can I best serve what God has placed in your life to help you achieve all that God has designed for you to achieve?*

Jesus saw potential in each of his followers, and now it was time to call that potential to the surface. While most leaders constantly try to get followers to serve their own agenda, Jesus had spent long enough walking with this bunch to know that they now carried a shared agenda: the coming kingdom of God. With the help of

the Holy Spirit, the disciples would now be leaders in building the universal church in Jesus' name.

How can I best serve the godly vision inside of you? When this question is asked, something powerful happens: leaders exchange places with followers, making room for them to rise up to continue their legacy and vision. Their motive is not self-serving. It is love directed toward God's purposes. If leaders are to succeed in the hardest part of leadership (the handoff), then their mission must primarily be an expression of selfless love that isn't focused on personal gain.

Multiplication and handoff of leadership happens most effectively through servanthood DNA, which consists of three factors: genuine love, vision for a kingdom-sized mission, and humility. Where we carry this type of DNA and serve one another, we find that others, in some significant way, can add to the ultimate vision that God has placed inside each one of us: to see his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. I believe that all great leadership ultimately serves into this one, great purpose.

Let's therefore lead like Jesus led. Let's learn to be servant-leaders and multiply this DNA in all those we lead. Through this path, you'll find your influence will have a greater impact in this season of your life. But surprisingly, something else important will happen: you will be able to hand off your leadership role to others for the ultimate good of your organization, which is the hardest of all leadership qualities to master. And that's what this book is all about.

How can I best serve what God has placed in your life to help you achieve all that God has designed for you to achieve?

How can I best serve the godly vision inside of you?