



BILL MOWRY

# The Ways of the Leader

*Four Practices to Bring People Together  
and Break New Ground*

Bill understands the cultural landscape for leaders in a fast-paced, unpredictable, and ever-changing environment. The practical guidance and foundational principles in this book are essential for building communities with greater impact and effectiveness in today's world.

MARVIN CAMPBELL, US president of The Navigators

Typically, resources on leadership are about achieving better performance, effectiveness, and outcomes. But this book is refreshingly different: It focuses on what the leader must become to wisely impact the cultures they serve in practical and transformative ways. This is the kind of leader that doesn't crash and burn.

Bill Mowry's writing is insightful yet easy to understand. He brings clarity and practicality to the question of how to lead from ordinary life assignments for extraordinary influence and impact. His examples bring clarity combined with exercises to maximize learning. Bill's writing style draws the reader in—inviting the reader to walk the pathway that leads to a relationally wise, emotionally intelligent, and spiritually astute leader.

PATTI DAMIANI, Relational Wisdom ministry consultant (RW360)

This world needs leaders, men and women of courage and character with learners' hearts. How can we grow as people—as individuals and in our families, workplaces, and places of worship—who influence with cultural wisdom and innovation? This is the beauty and power of Bill's writing. He provides practical and concrete tools that can be practiced in our

everyday lives. A much-needed resource in our world filled with polarization, silos, and independence.

LINDY BLACK, associate US director of The Navigators

Once again, Bill Mowry has given us an excellent book that is steeped in wisdom, refined by years of ministry experience, and inviting in tone. He builds a sturdy bridge from biblical principles to life practices as he guides leaders toward the competencies they need to respond to the rapidly changing challenges in our culture today. I highly recommend it!

DAN ESTES, distinguished professor of Old Testament at Cedarville University

In these changing, challenging times for church leaders comes a winsome book on gaining what we most need: wisdom. In *The Ways of The Leader*, Bill Mowry offers ministry leaders a resource on how to discern the wisest path forward through collegial learning, collaboration, contextual understanding, and innovative practices. This book is filled with anecdotes and quotes that will keep you engaged and reflecting. I look forward to using it with my team to gain the depth of insight we need to know how to reach our city. There are no silver bullets, no simple prescriptions for our times. We need to walk the way of wisdom and let God light our path. Thank you, Bill, for guiding us down that road in such a clear manner! A must-read for all leaders!

DAVE JANSEN, lead pastor for CenterPoint Church

This new book of Bill's is so practical, full of hope, and rich with examples. Biblical and relevant principles are supported with a plethora of tools and applications that can make the way of wisdom

a reality for the everyday disciple as well as the leader. The entire book is very helpful, but I especially love the last chapter on the choices leaders face, so pertinent to our culture and time—it's a gem!

MARGARET FITZWATER, Navigators national leadership,  
executive director Train-Develop-Care

Immensely practical! This book offers tools and principles that leaders can immediately put into practice, no matter their ministry or experience.

CANDACE DOLPH, director of women's ministry at  
Linworth Baptist Church

*The Ways of the Leader* is so engagingly simple that it removes leadership from the realm of the elite and places it within reach of anyone pursuing the way of wisdom. What is the way of wisdom? Don't worry, Bill clarifies and makes that beautifully tangible also. In *The Ways of the Alongsider*, Bill puts disciplemaking back into the hands of the everyday Christ-follower. In *The Ways of the Leader*, he makes key principles of leadership equally accessible for us all.

AL ENGLER, senior VP of field ministries at The Navigators

Bill has delivered a wise and winsome road map for everyday leaders to follow with confidence and hope as we move toward greater innovation and impact in the face of accelerating change. I have known Bill for four decades. He is a thinking practitioner who models these principles. Every leader I know would benefit greatly from the journey Bill invites us on in this excellent book. Well done!

EVAN GRIFFIN, communication professor and Navigator  
representative at the University of Cincinnati

*The Ways of the Leader* is timely, powerful, and a must-read for leaders of all ages. Leaders everywhere are facing the need to navigate the fastballs of change that often come with cultural and generational challenges. Bill reminds us all that successful (fruitful) leaders are on a path of continual learning and use everyday life as a classroom to live and lead like Jesus. The application of this wisdom becomes the key to their success and is a distance marker of being a disciple of Jesus.

GINA HOLM, associate director of Nav Life, leadership coach for Train-Develop-Care and Navigators Church Ministries

Christian leaders today are stepping into the unknown—into an unexplored country that exhibits hopelessness in ways that compound the challenges of leadership. Bill Mowry has given these leaders a biblically grounded set of tools which will free them from the distractions and inertia of “what worked in the past.” For those who are called to bring hope to hopeless situations, he illuminates essential tools of personal and cultural wisdom, learning, collaboration, and innovation to prepare them for God-glorifying, Christ-following leadership.

You won’t find simplistic answers or formulas here. This book is a practical, strategic collection of tools to apply to your unique contexts. If you sense you are stepping into the unknown, wondering how to lead others in a Christ-centered exploration, this book is for you.

JOHN MESSER, regional executive of RCA’s Synod of the Great Lakes

Bill has always excelled at being a skilled mentor and broad-range thinker around how leaders can grow in both character and vision. With its consistent bent toward lifelong learning

and openness to exploration and its readiness to serve and strengthen others, *The Ways of the Leader* reflects his life's work, a remarkable combination of spiritual depth and intellectual curiosity. Bill's focus on journey over destination provides freedom to the reader, allowing application across a range of situations and leadership considerations. Truly wisdom and love are the guides through an ever-changing landscape.

JOSH ANTONUCCIO, professor of media arts and studies,  
Ohio University's Scripps College of Communication

*The Ways of the Leader* is an insightful look at the current need for new leaders in a time of rapid sociocultural change. This isn't the typical book on leadership that tells you how to become a megastar. Bill describes leadership as the application of the principles of godly wisdom. This isn't a how-to book but a tool kit that will assist you to be the leader that God has designed you to be where he has placed you.

J. RUPERT MORGAN, PHD, resident missiologist at ABWE International

This book is the cure for "quick fix" formulas! And it couldn't be any timelier. Prescriptions won't work in the polarizing time we are in. A seasoned leader like Bill Mowry knows there is only one way through the chaos of our time. It's not a solution from an expert in another context. You will need to grow the deeper ways of wisdom that can help you navigate the uncharted terrain of your particular place and time. I highly recommend you get your people together and take a very deep dive into *The Ways of the Leader*.

PAUL SPARKS, coauthor of the award-winning book *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community*



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with Tyndale House Publishers



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*To Peggy, my friend, my partner, my love, my wife. In our nearly five decades together, God has used you to help me be a better disciple, leader, and author. Thank you!*



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# 1

## The Challenge Before Us

*Leading in Uncharted Territory*

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

**W. B. YEATS, "THE SECOND COMING"**

**IT'S TIME FOR TENNIS PRACTICE.** You assume the ready stance and anxiously wait for the machine to throw the first ball. Here it comes! You hit it squarely, but before you can recover your stance, another ball is coming at you. Then another . . . and another. The balls are coming so fast, you have no time to recover.

Welcome to leadership in the twenty-first century.

Leading today is like tennis practice when the ball machine is throwing fastballs. The fastballs of change keep coming at us! We barely have time to recover from the last swing before a new ball is headed our way.

The recent COVID pandemic was one of these fastballs of change. The pandemic accelerated several significant cultural changes: We've endured political transitions and a redefining of

employment, and many of us now have a heightened awareness of racism. Lockdowns and quarantines challenged how we “do church.” The centers of our culture, our churches, and our lives are barely holding.

Pastor and consultant Tod Bolsinger notes that we’re in uncharted territory. “The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you,” he writes.<sup>1</sup> “Today’s leaders are facing complex challenges that have no clear-cut solutions. . . . They can’t be solved through a conference, a video series or a program. . . . We have to learn to lead all over again.”<sup>2</sup>

We not only must lead differently, but we also need different kinds of leaders—heroic leaders who will know how to bring people together to break new ground.

Heroes are the people we admire for their life examples or good deeds. They’re the people we put on a pedestal, the people we name our children after, the people we aspire to be like. Today, in our church and social culture, we’re championing a certain type of hero—the highly trained professional leader. I’m writing to restore the hero of the everyday leader.

Why do we need these new heroes? The traditional hero of the megachurch pastor, the business executive, or the ministry leader is facing hard times. Almost daily, we hear how these traditional leaders—both inside and outside the church—fall through indiscretion or moral failure. We’ve created expectations about our leaders that no one person can satisfy.

We need new heroes because the traditional solitary leader’s expertise is no longer adequate for the rapid changes in our culture. What works in one setting does not automatically transfer to another. Local challenges demand something more than an imported, one-size-fits-all approach.

We need everyday leaders who bring people together to break new ground—crafting *local* solutions for *local* challenges. They don't outsource problems to distant experts who think and plan for them. Instead, they practice four biblical ways that create local strategies for local challenges.

Who are these everyday leaders? They can lack impressive titles, the coveted corner offices, or the resource of multiple staff. They're small- or mid-size church pastors, ministry leaders, community activists, and workplace influencers. These men and women often face the fastballs of change by themselves or with a limited staff or with volunteers. These everyday leaders are everywhere, serving in small and unnoticed places.

Everyday leaders are marked by three simple qualities. First, they have a love for the local expressed in an urgency to help neighborhoods, workplaces, or churches succeed and flourish. You could say they "own" the local; they're emotionally invested in the people and places closest to them.

Second, everyday leaders display Jesus in their lives. They value character over competency. Who they are is more important than what they can do.

Finally, in small and large ways, everyday leaders provide direction. They want to influence their workplaces, make their neighborhoods better, or encourage their churches to be more missional. They desire local strategies for local challenges.

Everyday leaders realize that solutions designed by distant experts may not be relevant in local settings. They need new ways to wisely think, serve, and lead. What new ways are needed to bring people together to break new ground?

Welcome to *The Ways of the Leader*. Be alert! This book will not provide you with solutions or answers, but it will give you tools



you can use to wisely develop your own strategies and solutions for local challenges.

Most of this book is targeted for church and ministry leaders. This is the arena in which I've lived and ministered for the past forty years. However, the principles and practices I will be sharing can be used by any leader in any setting. Whether you're leading in business, school, church ministry, or neighborhood, you can profit from this book.

No matter who you are, you're on the tennis court of life and ministry facing three fastballs of change. How you handle these balls will determine your effectiveness as a leader.

### **Ball No. 1: We Live in the Fast Lane**

Our culture is addicted to speed. We want faster smartphones, laptops, and customer service. I find myself impatiently tapping my foot if I have to wait in line or on a phone call longer than a few minutes. Don't people know I'm in a hurry?

Author Thomas Friedman writes that the pace of change in our culture is challenging our ability to adapt. Citing a conversation with Eric Teller, the CEO of X, Google's research lab, Friedman summarizes: "Change is now accelerating so fast that it has risen above the average rate at which most people can absorb all these changes. Many of us cannot keep pace anymore."<sup>3</sup>

Friedman and Teller are discussing technological change in society. However, we feel this change at a personal level in our everyday lives and ministries. Change is outstripping our ability to keep pace. The tennis balls keep coming at us! Our speed addiction shows up when words like *linger*, *saunter*, *stroll*, and *amble* have all but disappeared from our vocabularies, along with casual

synonyms like *stray*, *range*, *roam*, *ramble*, and *wander*.<sup>4</sup> There's an unspoken expectation, writes Carl Honoré, for people to "think faster, work faster, talk faster, read faster, write faster, eat faster, and move faster."<sup>5</sup> I feel tired already!

Life in the fast lane values screen time over think time. According to author Nicholas Carr, "It's often assumed that the time we devote to the Net [and other social media] comes out of the time we would otherwise spend watching TV. But statistics suggest otherwise. Most studies of media activity indicate that as Net use has gone up, television viewing has either held steady or increased."<sup>6</sup>

One everyday leader told me about creating a device-free zone in his home. "When I wake up," he said, "I immediately pick up my phone or iPad to check for messages. When a screen is present, I look at it. I can only slow down to think when these devices are absent."

Our busy schedules have placed us in a position where "we devote ever less time to the calmer, more attentive modes of thinking that have always given richness to our intellectual lives and our culture."<sup>7</sup> The richness that comes from slowing down aids the creative process.

Carl Honoré notes, "Research has shown that people think more creatively when they are calm, unhurried and free from stress, and that time pressure leads to tunnel vision."<sup>8</sup> Speed and busyness do not set the stage for creativity.

Staying in the fast lane creates superficial thinking; we end up "skim[ming] the surface, and fail[ing] to make real connections with the world or other people."<sup>9</sup> This failure to make connections prevents us from responding in new and fresh ways to the challenges around us. For everyday leaders, moving out of the fast lane means countering the fastball of speed.

## **Ball No. 2: We Live with Black Swans**

For hundreds of years, people assumed that all swans were white. No one thought that a black swan could exist because they had seen only white swans. Then black swans were discovered in Australia, and everyone's conceptions of the swan family were upended. The worlds of swan lovers everywhere were shattered! Welcome to life among black swans.

In his book *The Black Swan*, Nassim Taleb describes a black swan as a positive or negative event that is deemed improbable and yet causes massive consequences. Black swan events are unpredictable, but once they occur, they upset our personal or cultural realities.<sup>10</sup>

The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were black swan events. No one predicted that a small group of al-Qaeda sympathizers would terrorize the Western world using passenger jets as weapons. Donald Trump's election was a black swan event. Few predicted that he would be elected president, and his election turned the political world upside down. COVID-19 was another black swan event. While many scientists foresaw the possibility of a worldwide pandemic, no one predicted the virus's timing and subsequent impact on economies, politics, or education.

Why are black swan events impactful? Taleb argues that we make assumptions and predictions about the future based on the belief that our current reality will continue to be our future reality. What is true now gives us the comfort to predict the future. Seldom do we take into account the unexpected or the unpredictable.

As leaders, how do we respond to black swan events? What

skills do we need to live and minister in the middle of these events? If they're unpredictable, then the easy answers we desire will not magically appear. There are no easy answers when life is unpredictable and the future may not be like the present. Our familiar ways of doing things will have to be discarded as we deal with black swan events on multiple levels.

### **Ball No. 3: We Live in a Culturally Diverse Nation**

What does ministry look like in a diverse culture? Each immigrant and refugee family comes to America with culturally ingrained values regarding societal norms, education, religion, finances, and family life. How can everyday leaders understand and adapt to the variety of cultural elements within their cities, neighborhoods, businesses, and churches?

The old ministry models formed in a homogeneous culture are inadequate for today's challenges. Our culture is changing, and this change is reflected in the US Census Bureau's redistricting data on racial and ethnic groups in the 2020 national census.<sup>11</sup> What do the results tell us about the diversity of our nation?

- “Nearly four of 10 Americans identify with a race or ethnic group other than white.”
- “Racial and ethnic minorities accounted for all of the nation's population growth.”
- The Hispanic population has now outpaced the African American population (18.5% and 12.5% of the total population, respectively).
- “More than half of the nation's population under age 16 identified as a racial or ethnic minority.”

These statistics reveal that our nation is becoming more racially diverse from the bottom up by generation. In a few short decades, white culture will no longer be dominant in the US. The younger generation is not only more diverse but also thinks about diversity in different ways than the established older generation.

How do we lead in a nation that is rapidly becoming more diverse demographically? How do we respond with sensitivity and respect for cultures that are different from ours? What changes will this increased diversity bring to ministry, business, and church life? Local everyday leaders must learn to think, plan, and lead differently in an increasingly diverse culture.

### **We Need New Ways to Counter the Fastballs of Change**

Two challenges are becoming obvious. The first is that standard solutions are losing their ability to meet these fastballs of change. Gone are the days when a ministry or business “franchise” could be imported from one successful church, business, or ministry to another. A one-size-fits-all approach can no longer guarantee the same results in Portland, Cleveland, or Atlanta.

The second challenge is that the expertise of traditional solitary leaders is no longer adequate for the rapid changes in our culture. Few leaders are equipped to meet the challenges of social media, changing economic realities, and an increasingly diverse culture. These fastballs stretch and at times nullify the effectiveness of the solitary leader.

The solution I propose doesn't require expensive budgets, high-priced consultants, or elaborate programs. Nor does it call

for more personnel, a different strategic plan, or more buildings. The solution is pretty simple: Everyday leaders must practice God's way of wisdom, employing four wisdom-generating practices. Wisdom is the everyday leader's partner in our journey of life and ministry.

This wisdom and the four wisdom-generating practices are necessary to create local strategies for local challenges. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit and these four practices, you can bring people together to break new ground.

*Practice #1. The way of learning.* Everyday leaders are learners who know how to extract wisdom from the rhythms and routines of life. Life and ministry are God's classroom to teach and instruct us. We don't need simply another leadership seminar; we need to practice the way of lifelong learning.

*Practice #2. The way of collaboration.* Everyday leaders capture the power of people working collaboratively and wisely with others to develop new strategies for local challenges. Collaboration draws upon the wisdom in the group.

*Practice #3. The way of cultural wisdom.* Everyday leaders need cultural wisdom to understand and connect with the people they lead and minister to in specific contexts. To do this, they must become culture detectives, collecting clues about these contexts in order to lead more wisely and effectively.

*Practice #4. The way of innovation.* Everyday leaders create innovative strategies to meet local challenges. They redeem their birthrights as creators and employ their God-given imaginations in wise and innovative ways.



There's a natural flow to these four practices. When leaders become **lifelong learners**, they know how to extract wisdom from everyday life that gives insight to life and ministry challenges. This learning not only grows godly wisdom in their personal and leadership lives but also sparks the fire of learning in those around them.

Learning is the cornerstone of **collaboration**. Collaboration starts with a recognition that one person does not have all the answers but must draw upon the wisdom of the community around him or her to develop new strategies and solutions. When learning is modeled and encouraged, a natural reservoir of wisdom opens up in a local church, workplace, or neighborhood.

All leadership takes place in a context, a culture of people. If we're bringing people together to break new ground, then we must first understand the current "ground," or culture. **Cultural wisdom** is a natural outgrowth of individual and collective learning about the context in which we live, work, or minister.

For **innovation** to be effective, it must make sense for that particular culture and the people in it. Cultural wisdom shapes and provides a context for innovation to happen. As the agrarian philosopher and novelist Wendell Berry writes, “You have to fit the farming to the land.”<sup>12</sup> If a farmer doesn’t understand the land, then the crops will fail. In the same way, if our great, innovative ideas are irrelevant to our context, then those innovations are useless.

What happens when these four ways are practiced? The Holy Spirit allows us to grow in wisdom—the ability to choose the good and the right.

I cannot overemphasize that this is a flow and not a mechanistic, step-by-step process. Some of the practices may be more relevant than others to your challenges. Some “steps” may demand less time. Leaders will need wisdom to decide what is good and right for their local settings.

It’s my prayer and hope that these four ways of leading will become part of your life and ministry.

### **How to Use This Book**

I recommend using one of the following approaches as you engage with the content in this book.

1. Read the book in its entirety to gain an overview of the four ways or practices.
2. Use this resource like a cookbook, reading and applying one practice at a time. Just as you wouldn’t make all the recipes in a cookbook at the same time, so you won’t immediately apply all four ways of leading.



3. Treat this book as a series of progressive exercises where you take a group of people sequentially through the four practices. This process will yield the best results when you identify a specific challenge or problem rather than simply reading the material together.
4. View it as a training manual for ministry or leadership development. For example, I suggest that every leader in a church or ministry immediately apply the practice of life-long learning.
5. Use this book as a blueprint for personal development. At the end of the book are practice assignments to help you apply the ways of learning. You can pick and choose one or more of these assignments to learn how to use the practice(s) described.

However you engage with this book, I hope that it will enable you to lead in ways that bring people together to break new ground. I invite you to start this journey by meeting our journey's partner—Lady Wisdom.