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Book Review: The Next Generation Leader

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The Next Generation Leader

Reviewed by Dirke Johnson

Stanley, Andy The Next Generation Leader. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003. 165 pp.

The Next Generation Leader is written with the objective to equip present and emerging Christian leaders to positively shape the future as they advance God's kingdom work on earth. The author, Andy Stanley, is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary and the pastor of North Point Community Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Married with two sons and a daughter at the time of writing, it is his desire that the reader would learn what it takes to lead with courage and then follow with character.

Stanley emphasizes five leadership essentials for those who are presently leading or are aspiring leaders. He draws from his experience as a successful pastor of the growing and vibrant North Point Community Church, and his observations and involvement with his father, Charles Stanley's well-known and lengthy legacy of effective leadership.

The book is divided into five sections of three chapters each highlighting the five essentials of leadership: Competence, Courage, Clarity, Coaching and Character. Each section concludes with a summary highlighting the principles taught in the preceding chapters and five questions for the reader to ask themselves.

The first essential of Competence highlights the importance of understanding one's limitations and finding a work environment where one can focus their energies on the few things that they do well. Stanley warns the reader not to allow one's time to get eaten up with responsibilities or projects that fall outside of their core competencies. He encourages the reader to delegate responsibilities that they are weak in so their weaknesses are an

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opportunity for others (45).

Courage is the second essential. Stanley uses the David and Goliath story to illustrate that a key leadership quality is not just to know what to do, but to have the courage to do it in the face of failure or high risk. He says, "don't let the 'how' get in the way of pursuing 'what.'" (76). Leaders seize opportunities.

Clarity is the third essential. Stanley distinguishes the difference between clarity and certainty. Leaders are often not certain if the new direction is the right direction, but they must be clear on what that direction needs to be if they hope for others to have confidence to follow them. He then balances the need for clarity with the caution that one must not pretend. Truth is their friend and advice from others is not a weakness but a sign of security in oneself. Along with no pretense is the need for flexibility. Stanley says, "Pencil in your plans. Etch the vision in stone." (99).

The fourth essential is Coaching. No leader has all the gifts or all the abilities necessary for their vision to be fulfilled by themselves. An effective leader realizes they need others who will be better at certain things than they are. A good leader understands the importance of coaching his team and of having a coach for himself (128).

The last essential is Character. Stanley points out that one can be a leader without character, but they will never be a leader worth following. Our co-workers and those who report to us "will judge you not so much for where you led them, but how you led them" (133). Stanley shares that the more successful a leader, the greater the stakes will become in the character realm. He emphasizes that our "character shapes the experience of those who choose to journey with you" (159).

Stanley gives a persuasive argument for the five essentials to effective leadership. He does not suggest that his list is exhaustive but does seem to cover the critical areas of leadership. In my opinion he accomplishes his objective of motivating a leader to excel still more while encouraging one to examine their current leadership style in order to improve. Freedom to receive advise, counsel and to open oneself up to constructive feedback while engaging a personal coach is made to sound appealing. Such behavior is often missing with many who are in spiritual leadership positions today.

Stanley has several factors going for him in the writing of this book. His pedigree has given him instant ethos, especially when you factor in that he is a pastor of a large and growing church that seems on the cutting edge of ministry. He salts each of his points with stories of current experiences as a pastor or as a minister in his father's church. And he quotes John Maxwell

often. In fact, his leadership principles and writing seem very similar to Maxwell's. Without question he has been influenced by him.

Although the book is written to appeal to leaders of all variety, even in secular settings, without doubt the book will speak stronger to someone in either a pastoral leadership role or someone who has a team that reports to them in some type of mission setting. Because the vast majority of his illustrations were centered around a church setting it was hard to escape that applicative context. The book did not deal with theological doctrines but more practical insights regarding sociological and psychological principles in working with people. Even in using various biblical examples, they centered on human relationships of leading. I would not be surprised if the small church pastor who only has himself as a paid staff will struggle with some of what Stanley suggests since they lack the arsenal of resources to draw upon that seem so readily handy for a pastor in Stanley's position.

I believe the strength of the book is the three essentials. I love his distinguishing between certainty and clarity while encouraging the seeking of counsel from others so that one grows into certainty (95). The essential on "coaching" is excellent as it compares the athletic world and points out how every athlete has a coach, no matter how great they are. Often the coach is not as good as the athlete at the sport they coach, but they are excellent at observation and instruction and therefore the athlete improves. Stanley contrasts a coach with counseling, consulting and mentoring. The distinguishing characteristic is that a coach constantly watches. Their input relates only to what they have observed whereas a mentor may share their wisdom on a particular topic. A coach would include elements of a mentor and more (108). And the fifth essential of "character" emphasizes the inner spiritual condition of a leader. He uses the example of the three Jewish boys held captive by the King of Babylon as ones who demonstrated character by doing what is right, even when it is hard (143). He did a great job of emphasizing that our legacy will be remembered more by how we lead than what we do.

His first two essentials were good, but I felt lacked in different ways. The first one on competence can actually mess people up who do not properly apply it to their situation. His primary point is focus. Concentrate on those things you are good at and delegate to others the things you aren't good at. I would agree. However, he did not balance out such advice from preventing two misapplications. The first is recognizing that those entering ministry or the work world in general will benefit by having

numerous types of work experiences. A person in their early to mid twenties does not really know all of what they are really good at. As a Human Resource director I have many examples of distorted views of people's personal skills assessment. My second concern is that although there is wisdom that we should spend the bulk of our time in our strengths, there is wisdom to develop our weaknesses to a minimal level. Someone reading Stanley's first essential could easily walk away and feel that there are certain things that are beneath them because it does not fit into their gift mix. I have already encountered this thinking by a young intern right out of college after hearing John Maxwell say the same thing.

The second essential on Courage I felt was good, but he didn't connect it to any spiritual condition of listening to the Lord. He uses the example of David's courage to attack Goliath. Stanley says that "courage was his catalyst for leadership" (60). But where does his courage come from? This is never addressed and I think misses the entire point of this biblical narrative. David had courage and thus exhibited his natural leadership skill because he was acting on the promises of God and the past faithfulness of God in his life. Although he does a good job of emphasizing the need for a leader to seize opportunities, he fails to emphasize that unless a leader is in God's word and is hearing from the Lord, he may seize opportunities with great courage but wrong motivations.

But with those few points withstanding, I thought the book was excellent and has motivated me to look for a coach to speak into my life as a leader and I plan to use this book with a group of men that I co-work with. Anyone who is leading groups of people would benefit from the leadership principles that Andy Stanley lays out. His principles provide excellent discussion starters and the questions at the end of each section make it easy to lead in a group setting.

Reviewer

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