

Rock Solid Leading in Reverse

BLOG

April 2010 – Some things you just don't see coming. Like a traffic jam on the staircase of your own home!

Charlie and Dillan, our two grandsons, 16 months and 10 months of age, LOVE our stairs! When they are at our home, our two little “hockey pucks” are up and down them constantly. As the progression goes, once they learn how to crawl, the next hill to conquer is the stairs. And then of course, once they learn to climb UP the stairs, they have to learn how to back DOWN the stairs. And that's when the traffic jams occur! It's hilarious watching these two little guys figure out how to navigate in reverse. (For their next visit, Pattie and I are going to set up fluorescent orange traffic cones!).

Well, what is true for kids learning to explore, is true for leaders learning to lead well. There are times when squeezing in the clutch and smoothing the transmission into REVERSE is not only a good idea, but a necessary one.

Pardon the mixed metaphor, but leading in reverse is when you hit the pause button and head to the locker room to review some game film.

Over the years, I have facilitated meetings where people have resorted to trench warfare by tossing invective grenades at each other. These unwelcomed, pernicious skirmishes give rise to leading in reverse — some after-action response.

In one such situation, at the close of the meeting, I asked to meet with the offending parties for some moments of postmortem. I have vivid memories of what happened in that ensuing conversation and beyond because it was a beautiful thing. Tossing their own penalty flags, both individuals quickly named and owned their words and actions. They reconciled with each other. They sent emails out the next day to the other meeting participants, calling out their desired do-overs. And finally, when we gathered for our next weekly meeting, we took several minutes to call out the lessons learned from it all.

The leaders who grow through conflict learn to reflect on their own actions. They take responsibility for their contribution to the situation. In doing so, they allow God to carry on His heart-shaping activity in the pressure cooker of conflict.

—Reggie McNeal

You know, leading in reverse, among other things, takes humility. It's confessing that I am a work in progress. It's admitting that I have a long way to go. It's inviting others to help me discover my blind spots. And even beyond that, it is giving voice to the times when I really

know the right thing to do, but willfully elect not to do it.

For my money, one of the most important statements in the New Testament regarding leadership, especially when it comes to leading in reverse is: *God opposes the proud but favors the humble.* (Any debate on which side of the ledger YOU want to be on?!)

God loves it when we stare into the rear-view mirror to candidly and humbly assess our hearts, our actions, our words, our attitudes, our lives. And when we do so He rushes in with His favor and grace — something I sure need and certainly don't want to miss.

As a fellow traveler, I've collected a few reflective questions that help me to lead in reverse. Let me relay them to you for your consideration.

- Where is God in the middle of this set of circumstances? How might I be prone to miss HIM and HIS voice in the details? What is He nudging me to resolve?
- What is the life and leadership 'takeaway' presented here that will serve me well in the days ahead if I grab it and toss it into my toolkit?
- With whom do I need to process this event to extract the greatest benefit from it?
- How can this situation be showcased as a learning moment for the rest of those in whose lives I have influence?

In her destined-to-be-a-classic book, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, Ruth Haley Barton observes: *For a leader to take time to turn aside and look is no small thing. In the rush of normal life, we often blow right past the place where God is creating a stir to get our attention. But at the heart of spiritual leadership is the capacity to notice the activity of God so we can join Him in it.*

Leading in reverse is the essential antidote to fast-tracking through life and forfeiting the moments — both large and small — where God quietly offers a personal invitation to learn and experience something new about Himself and how He works.

So in a world of life and leadership where we spend the majority of our hours in FORWARD, don't forget to shift into REVERSE from time to time. These deliberative moments will make you a better person and a better leader. Guaranteed.

Lord, I am so prone to drink the elixir of got-to-get-it-done activity that I run the risk of missing You and Your words of invitation to know You in fresher and deeper ways. Remind me throughout the day of my desperation and longing to have You as the Leader of my life.