

The Softer Side of Leadership

As a wholehearted believer that leaders ultimately lead with their lives, I uploaded *The Softer Side of Leadership: Essential Skills That Transform Leaders and the People They Lead* the moment I first learned of this book. In it, author and educator Eugene Habecker argues convincingly for the centrality of “soft skills” in leadership. In particular, he captures his thesis well in these words: *The focus on the heart is part of what some have referred to as the “being” side of leadership. “Being” pertains less to what leaders do and more to who leaders are. The being side is contrasted with the doing side. Interestingly, what we do is informed by who we are. Being precedes doing.* I could not agree more. Kingdom leaders ultimately lead from the inside out.

Check out these Book Notes to get a fly-over of ways to strengthen the core of your leadership impact.

Title: *The Softer Side of Leadership: Essential Soft Skills That Transform Leaders and the People They Lead*

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Book Description:

Many who aspire to be organizational leaders focus on developing “hard” skills, related to quantitative action and analytical thinking. These are important, but over his many decades of executive leadership, Dr. Eugene B. Habecker has learned to value the “softer” side of leadership. Unfortunately, these “soft” skills and behaviors are often neglected, to the detriment of both leadership and organizational development.

In *The Softer Side of Leadership*, Dr. Habecker, president emeritus of Taylor University, makes a case for these skills and provides practical ways to develop them and put them into action. He draws from his own experience, other leadership experts, and from the Bible.

The Softer Side of Leadership has two main sections. The first section focuses on the soft skills that effective leaders develop in a more personal dimension. These skills help leaders build and maintain a healthy spiritual, mental, and physical foundation that will benefit them personally as much as professionally. The second section naturally builds on the first, focusing on skills that effective leaders foster in the organizational dimension, such as creativity, trust, and forgiveness.

Many of these skills, practices, and attitudes may be difficult for readers whose business education has been driven by numbers and immediate results. But to be effective, they must commit to continuous learning—and that includes understanding the softer side of leadership. These soft skills support what hard skills cannot, at least not on their own: a culture that better promotes robust mission fulfillment.

Each chapter includes key takeaways and action steps, equipping readers to immediately develop and employ the skills presented. As readers develop the skills and behaviors presented in *The Softer Side of Leadership* and pair them with hard skills, they will become stronger, more well-rounded leaders.

Book Quotes:

Many who aspire to be organizational leaders limit their leadership development to acquiring more knowledge and information—more “competence training” learning, and more “hard” skills and information about what leaders do. Developing competencies in “hard skills” is an important part of understanding leadership. But effective leadership requires more than just hard skill acquisition. It also requires soft skills and behaviors about work and the workplace. LOCATION: 153

As used in this book, soft skills represent a collection of primarily qualitative skills, behaviors, practices, habits, disciplines, and attitudes that characterize how people interact and behave with one another. LOCATION: 166

As an illustration, I often explain to students that effective leaders have to do multiple things well, but that in crisis situations, three things must be done exceptionally well: absorb chaos, give calm, and provide hope. LOCATION: 169

To be sure, there are not always clear lines of demarcation between hard and soft skills. On the one hand, “hard skills” seem to focus more on what leaders do, whereas “soft skills” tend to focus on how leaders lead. LOCATION: 181

Leadership ought not to be viewed, then, as some holy grail to be found or identified, once and for all. Rather, leadership needs to be embraced as more of a reality to be experienced and lived rather than only a discipline to be learned and studied. In essence, effective leadership is an art that regularly requires some combination of wisdom, knowledge, understanding, good judgment, discernment, common sense, and, of course, experiential and book-and-classroom learning. LOCATION: 219

Hard skills, while necessary, are not sufficient to meet all of the expectations for effective organizational leadership. Soft skills are also essential. Because leaders differ in terms of their skill sets and personality types, and because leadership is carried out in widely different contexts, the soft skills leaders pursue and deploy will be different. LOCATION: 303

The creation of sacred space within our homes, the workplace, and our workday is vital for effective leadership...Sacred space is that place where boundaries are placed in some way that allows refocusing of the mind and soul on a different agenda, a transcendent one rather than a transactional one—where “Heaven seems to touch Earth and we find ourselves aware of the Holy, and filled with the Spirit.” LOCATION: 351

Sacred space is often where vision is birthed, where it is nurtured, and where it flourishes. It’s where we listen to the “still small voice” saying “over here—here’s the way forward.” This is foundational for leadership. LOCATION: 376

Leaders lead out of who they are on the inside. One writer has noted that the first challenge facing leaders “is a matter of how to be [leaders]—not how to do [leadership].” LOCATION: 384

There are many who note concern for the busy schedules of leaders. Even though leaders are not necessarily any busier than many others, their busyness is often a result of an excessive workload or pervasive technology. Sometimes busyness can be a cover-up, an attempt to run from personal issues otherwise needing to be addressed. LOCATION: 478

But many times, honesty compels us to admit that our busyness may only be a mask to cover up our need to address our innermost thoughts. So we stay busy, very busy. LOCATION: 485

Making sure they have sacred space is foundational for leadership. If sacred space, which provides fuel for the leadership furnace, is nonexistent, then on what foundation will leaders build their leadership agenda? If there is no capacity to listen to and seek the voice of God, if there is no capacity for deep thinking, then what? LOCATION: 524

So what are some of the other big rocks or braces that need to be part of the foundation out of which one does leadership—a foundation for leaders that will help keep them from drifting, to enable them to stay focused? I want to emphasize only a few in addition to sacred space, knowing, of course, that leaders will select from among many others as places to begin. 1) Ensuring a spiritual foundation is one of those leadership “big rocks.” 2) The ability to ask the right question is another. 3) A determination to finish what you start, no matter what, is also essential. LOCATION: 628

In addition to putting in the big rocks of a vibrant spiritual foundation, another important foundational leadership expectation is to know how to ask the right questions—the strategic questions—and when to ask them. LOCATION: 713

Why did Jesus ask questions? Since He was the Son of God, why didn’t He just make declarative statements, recognizing that all of His words were truth? Since Jesus, fully God, knew in advance the answers to the questions He was raising, why was asking questions a part of His focus? There are many answers, of course, but strategic questions have a way of engaging people. And strategic questions often expose what is in the heart. Strategic questions require focus and formulation of answers. They force people to think for themselves. Strategic questions have a way of disarming and unmasking us. Presidents and CEOs sitting before news reporters also know that reality. Strategic questions ultimately bring clarity to issues. Asking strategic questions is a form of teaching and learning. LOCATION: 747

Just as our Lord frequently asked questions of others, always with a purpose in mind, the ability to ask the right questions, the strategic question, is an essential leadership soft skill. LOCATION: 758

Author Lisa Lai addressed these issues in a Harvard Business Review article, “Being a Strategic Leader Is about Asking the Right Questions.” She notes five questions that every leader ought to be asking their leadership teams: 1) What are we doing today? 2) Why are you doing the work you’re doing? Why now? 3) How does what we’re doing today align with the bigger picture? 4) What does success look like for our team? 5) What else could we do to achieve more, better, faster?” LOCATION: 808

Leaders desire to be culturally relevant. We live and work in communities where our children attend school and where we like our neighbors. We desire to be liked, to belong, and it hurts when we are attacked, be it from inside the organization or from without. We need to remember, though, that one of the leader’s primary responsibilities—if not the primary responsibility—is to curate, protect, and enhance the organization’s mission and values often preserved and handed down from preceding decades, if not centuries. The biblical record reminds us that there is a difference between relevance and faithfulness. As we noted earlier, Moses got this wrong; many times so do we. Finishing what we start is about several things, but to be sure, it is about walking in faithful obedience to God’s calling, no matter how difficult. This is a qualitative commitment a leader makes, not a quantitative one. It’s about heart resolve, not cultural relevance. It’s about keeping your word, no matter what the cost. LOCATION: 816

To be sure, honest self-examination, especially for leaders, is not easy. It can be downright scary for the uninitiated. We’d rather keep our busy schedules, doing important things, pursuing our organizational agenda. All in senior leadership know that reality; we’ve all been there. Nouwen suggests that one of the reasons for the

busy, seemingly frenetic schedules we leaders maintain is not driven by the necessity of the leadership position. Rather, we keep up that kind of schedule because it allows us to hide from ourselves, or from our spouse or children, or perhaps to escape the kind of positive introspection so necessary for life itself. LOCATION: 1070

One way that happens is by staying connected to the heart. Yet for many, embracing the soft skill of heart-work is uncharted territory. Most likely staying connected to the heart does not dominate many executive lunchroom conversations. Why is it that we tend to be more comfortable exploring the external, “hard” realities of our world? Why, for instance, do decisions based primarily on intuition tend to make us less settled, less certain? Why is it that we often tend to be more comfortable with decisions based on notebooks filled with charts, tables, graphs, analytics, and statistics suggestive of a decision in one direction rather than another? LOCATION: 1184

The focus on the heart is part of what some have referred to as the “being” side of leadership. “Being” pertains less to what leaders do and more to who leaders are. The being side is contrasted with the doing side. Interestingly, what we do is informed by who we are. Being precedes doing. LOCATION: 1193

We find story after story about the constant difficulties faced by the people being led by their leaders, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, along with Esther, Judith, Rahab, and Ruth. Yet, the promise from God was not deliverance from difficulty but deliverance in difficulty. Pain to pain. Not plan and solution, but God’s presence. We want the plan for deliverance but oftentimes marginalize the importance of God’s presence. LOCATION: 1366

The reality is that fitness renewal—that is, getting in shape physically and sustaining fitness, holistically—is a soft skill that is indispensable for effective leadership. LOCATION: 1431

Probably one of my favorite definitions of trust comes from Covey, who defines trust this way: “Simply put, trust means confidence. The opposite of trust—distrust—is suspicion.” Elsewhere, he says, “Trust is a function of both character (which includes integrity) and competence.” Trust is the gift given to those in authority, that the best interests of those not present in the room will be attended by those who are: “When I trust someone, I am saying that in matters affecting my welfare, I believe that the one trusted will be concerned about me and will diligently work for the betterment of my interests.” LOCATION: 1936

Trust is like a bridge that has to be carefully built, with a solid foundation people can cross and use for other purposes. Effective leaders make developing and enhancing trust a top organizational priority. LOCATION: 1947

Trust is an essential ingredient—maybe the most essential ingredient, almost like food and water—for all of organizational life at both the vertical and horizontal levels. When people know they are trusted, they are empowered. And when they’re not, disempowerment follows. Trust is the glue that binds and helps establish and maintain relationships, and helps keep organizations and families together and focused. LOCATION: 1999

Trust is not something that can be endowed, or bought or sold on the open market. At the risk of being simplistic, one can’t go into the convenience market and buy two packages of trust. Trust can’t be demanded or insisted upon through the use of position or power, nor can it be established by a resolution by a board. How does a leader obtain trust? Trust must be earned; it must be nourished, and again, ideally, it should be mutual. Not only should the people believe in their leaders, but the leaders should also believe the people entrusted to their leadership and care. LOCATION: 2006

Building, growing, enhancing, and restoring trust where it is broken remains perhaps the key challenge for effective leaders. It is another soft skill that is indispensable for leadership. LOCATION: 2091

Leaders need to be willing to place themselves in a position to ensure that others, not just themselves, have a role to play in helping them to be accountable. Leaders must listen to, and seek, the insight and feedback of others within the organization. If they don't, they will often end up creating a false reality of their effectiveness as leaders. That often leads them to make poor choices for themselves and the organization. It is important to be open to others in this way to lead effectively. LOCATION: 2251

People can handle only so much feedback that's critical at any one time, no matter how helpful or valid. However labeled, feedback is usually viewed as receiving criticism. Again, leadership literature suggests that for criticism to be effective, it needs to be given in a ratio of about six parts praise, one part criticism—a 6:1 ratio. LOCATION: 2277

I believe that forgiveness has a role to play in the life of an organization as well, not just in a vertical context with regard to one's relationship to God. Forgiveness applies horizontally, person to person, outside of the workplace—but is also relevant horizontally, position to position, and across every level of the workplace. LOCATION: 2386

Practicing forgiveness is one of the ways leaders free themselves from the accumulated baggage of the multiple hurts and harms experienced—hurts and harms that might otherwise immobilize them. LOCATION: 2411

The paradox for leaders is that those being led desire both leadership perfection as well as vulnerability in their leaders. Followers need to know their leaders are real, authentic persons. But every leader knows the reality of having shared too much, of having been too vulnerable. There is a fine line that leaders need to walk, and they have to get that balance right. LOCATION: 2439

There are at least four parts or phases to the forgiveness cycle. I present them here in a kind of linear format, although they are more nonlinear in practice: confrontation, forgiveness, restoration, and restitution. LOCATION: 2453

Phase One: Confrontation An important part in any discussion of forgiveness is the concept of confrontation...This is where confrontation comes in. Make no mistake, confrontation presupposes standards and expectations of some kind. In other words, people need to know—indeed, deserve to know in advance—what the expectations are for their success. LOCATION: 2465

The first phase of confrontation has to do with the provision of clearly communicated performance expectations in advance of evaluation. LOCATION: 2469

The purpose of confrontation is not to catch people doing something wrong. Rather, it is to confirm that people are on the right path—and if they are not, to help them get back on the path. LOCATION: 2479

Thus far my focus has been on discussing three phases in the forgiveness cycle—confrontation, forgiveness, and restoration. Often that is enough. But sometimes it is not. Why? In some offense-generating situations, property—sometimes tangible and sometimes intangible—is an issue. The focus of restitution is to repair the property damage, to make the damaged person whole. This, too, is part of the forgiveness cycle. Unfortunately, this property or financial part is often not readily acknowledged within organizations, so lawyers and litigation often result. LOCATION: 2638

The operative difference between a subordinate and a follower comes down to the words “have to,” as compared to the words “want to.” Subordinates have to go to work. Followers want to go to work. The task of leaders is to help subordinates make the shift to follower-ship—what Gardner refers to as a leadership art. This leadership art is a soft skill, and its pursuit is no easy quest. It is a necessary one. LOCATION: 2732

Many mistakenly believe that a position of authority makes one a leader. Not so. If you hold a position of authority, you have subordinates, but not necessarily followers. The leadership task is to see a shift from subordinate to follower—from “I have to do this” to “I want to do this.” LOCATION: 2757

I remember flying home to New York from a Los Angeles board meeting that had a planned stopover in Chicago. My seatmate on the flight, it turned out, was a management consultant from Princeton, New Jersey. We swapped stories of what we had seen and experienced in various organizations, and we finally got to this question: “What is the one essential question you have found that every effective leader needs to answer?” His answer was quick and insightful: “Who can say no to you—and make it stick?” His point was that if there is no one who can do this, whether within an organization or outside it, then that leader has no accountability. That’s where fault lines eventually develop, which often lead to the destruction or impairment of both the leader and the organization. LOCATION: 2789

Fast Company magazine may have changed that view with one of its cover stories, when it boldly proclaimed, “Love Is the Killer App,” subtitling the article, “Why faith beats fear, greed isn’t good, and nice guys finish first, really.” In the article, Tim Sanders, formerly chief solutions officer of Yahoo, said, “I’m here to convince you that what the business world needs now is love!”...Sanders seems to be suggesting that when you give your life away by investing in another, you find yourself growing as well. This counterintuitive focus about embedding a culture of love within the organization being led is yet another soft-skill focus that needs to be embraced by leaders. LOCATION: 2911

Leaders who understand and are committed to embedding love as a soft skill into their organizational culture are not afraid of losing whatever leadership position they have been given. They understand that their position doesn’t belong to them for private purposes or for personal gain in the first place. Rather, it has been given as a trust to be exercised of behalf of others and for a larger mission and purpose. When leaders understand that, they understand the true genius of giving themselves away, and that truly the greatest soft skill is love.
LOCATION: 3141

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle “location” is provided after each entry.