

Leading from the Second Chair
Serving your church, fulfilling your role, and realizing your dreams
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As you will see in our definition, a second chair leader does not have to fit a particular mold or hold a particular title, and this was certainly true for the individuals with whom we spoke in preparing for this book. Some saw the second chair as their lifelong calling while others saw it as a step on their way to a first chair role. Many had titles that clearly indicated their second chair role, but not all did. This book is written with second chair leaders in mind, but it will also be a useful tool for those in the first chair. If you are the senior pastor or executive director or are in some other top role, we hope you will gain new insights into your second chairs' attitudes and actions.

A second chair leader is *a person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization*. A person who is able to succeed by influencing others is a more effective leader than one who issues edicts to be obeyed. Leading from the second chair requires this kind of pure leadership because it seeks to improve the entire organization, from the first chair to the last, without the formal authority of being the first chair leader. In fact, *our definition can include anyone who is not the lead leader*. Every organization has a perceived pecking order. In reality, our position may be tenth chair, or seventh, or one chair leader – a person in a subordinate role *who has an opportunity to influence others and add value throughout the organization*. Of course, even the first chair leader answers to someone. Ultimately, in Christ's Kingdom, we are all in the second chair, submitting to Christ as the head.

Three apparent paradoxes of second chair leadership: *subordinate-leader, deep-wide, and contentment-dreaming*. Effective second chair leaders need to live within each paradox and master both ends of the spectrum. Although each paradox is present to some degree for every second chair, a leader's specific situation or personality may lead to extra stress in one of the three. The second chair requires a special leadership lens that brings clarity to the challenges of the three paradoxes. The lens must be trifocal, allowing you to focus on how you manage your relationships (subordinate-leader paradox), your work habits (deep-wide paradox), and your emotions (contentment-dreaming paradox).

Second chair leaders need to be in place and allowed to lead if a church is going to have enduring success. One purpose of this book is to encourage you to be patient and learn as much as you can in your current role. Whatever your current or future chair may be, you can learn valuable lessons today that will have long-lasting benefits. An attitude of contentment and a desire to learn are foundational elements of effective second chair leadership. The majority of congregations in America are struggling. Lack of a broad, effective core of leaders is a critical factor in this stagnation. For the church to further grow in its redemptive potential, a new wave of second chair leaders is essential, men and women who work in concert with their first chair leaders to accomplish the mission that God has placed before them. The potential second chairs who are waiting in the wings need to step forward, and the first chairs need to encourage and empower them. Leading from the second chair is pure leadership because it seeks to improve the entire organization without the positional power of being in the first chair.

Long-term, successful leadership is based on influence that is developed through strong relationships and wise decisions in ministry. Using your gifts and building strong relationships are high-yield ways to increase the leadership bank account. Influence for first chairs accrues more quickly and at a much greater level than for someone who fills a secondary role. Second chairs may have deeper influence in certain areas, but it takes longer for them to build broad organizational influence. *Influence is the most important leadership building block in a second chair's toolkit*.

The Choices of the Second Chair
Choice One: Put on Leadership Lenses

No matter what the challenge, they try to step back and look at every problem or opportunity through leadership lenses. It affects the way you process information, make decisions, and prioritize your time. But more than just learning, you need to apply these lessons in your leadership context.

Choice Two: Maximize Major Opportunities

You have unique opportunities to do something that stretches you as a leader and that can have tremendous benefit for your congregation. Be prepared to recognize and act on those unique moments that can shape you and set you apart as a second chair leader.

Choice Three: Don't Back Down From the Right Decision

Second chair leaders are called upon to follow God in some hard decisions and challenging moments. It is imperative that you walk confidently in the Lord and ask him to give you favor with your congregation and constituents.

Choice Four: Decide to Thrive

An essential attitude in the second chair is *submission*. It is recognition of the source of authority. Second chairs need to be “thankful in all circumstances “

The final attitude is a *passion* for being the best.

The First Paradox: Subordinate --- Leader

It deals with how you as a leader are interfacing with and following the lead of your senior leader.

A Biblical Standard- Discipleship

Effective second chair leaders are successful in the subordinate-leader paradox because they learn to follow and repeatedly choose to follow. Anyone who lacks humility is certain to encounter conflict with the first chair.

“Subordinate quotient.” How do you respond when the first chair does something you dislike? Take a look at these brief scenarios and reflect on how you most likely would respond:

- When your first chair goes against your recommendation on a particular decision
- When your first chair criticizes a decision you have made or an action you have taken
- When your first chair gives someone else an important job you think you should do

Rate yourself on each question using this scale:

1= *Fight*: you openly disagree and directly challenge your first chair.

2= *Flight*: you walk away wounded and feel like giving up.

3= *Stay involved without confrontation*: you accept the decision for what it is but stay engaged in the discussion and accept the first chair's final decision, whatever it may be.

Would you rather be in right first on the issues, or in right relationship? As you seek to be in right relationship first and foremost, you are more successful in implementing your approach to ministry. You cultivate credible and lasting influence with your senior leader. You will influence the organization over the long haul because of the relational seeds you sow. A right relationship opens the door for success in the second chair.

What allows second chair leaders to earn their senior leader's highest level of trust? Obviously they chose to be in right relationship and were willing to be subordinate. They understood the boundaries for their role, which is the focus of the next chapter. But they did more than just stay out of trouble or play safe. Second chair leaders need to be bold. They need to make a difference in their organization. They must be trusted with large, organization-shaping responsibilities. The majority of the second chair leaders we interviewed saw their gifts and skills as different from and highly complementary to those of their first chair. Interestingly, complementary skills and mutual respect do not inherently mean that first and second chairs are good friends socially. They may not have a natural affinity, but the successful pairs make up for it with common vision and passion.

A final trust builder is time. If you are not prepared to be patient while trust grows, you are unlikely to reach your full potential as a second chair leader.

Ultimately, the benefit of being in a right relationship with your senior leader is the opportunity to see your ministry soar to the next level. A congregation appreciates harmony between the second chairs and first chair. The congregation's buy-in and contribution to the ministry always increase when this occurs. With first and second chair leaders in harmony, titles lose their significance and the kingdom is advanced.

Crossing the line

When a well meaning second chair takes initiative, he or she may unintentionally run counter to the desires of the lead leader. Healthy, long-term relationships require three things: recognition of the existence of the line, flexibility in placement of the line, and caution in crossing the line. First, recognize that a line exists. It defines responsibilities and authority, and it is much more than what is conveyed in a job description. Second, those who cross the line do so at their own peril. Crossing the line is insubordination, and the relationship between first and second chair cannot survive if insubordination exists. Third, it is possible to proactively move the line. It takes time and trust, but second chair roles can be reshaped. To bring it back full circle, many second chair leaders begin to have problems when they

accidentally cross a line that they failed to recognize. Finding the lines that set your boundaries in a crucial part of the subordinate-leader paradox.

So where is the line? For second chair leaders, it is often dynamic. They have specific responsibilities, but much of their role is based on the needs and traits of the chair and the current circumstances of the organization. If you are constantly seeking direction, your first chair may become frustrated. If you never ask for clarification, you are probably taking too many risks of crossing the line.

While Greg Hawkins was still relatively new in his role as executive pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, he always had special projects he was working on. He tended to do the research and then present several options without recommendation to his senior pastor, Bill Hybels. Over time, he realized that Bill wanted him to do more than just list alternatives; he was looking to Greg to make a recommendation. Not only did Greg need to make recommendations, he should make them with conviction. Greg learned to apply a “flinch test” to any presentation he was going to make. He began to assume that Bill was going to ask, “What would you do?” If Greg’s reaction was to flinch as he made the recommendation, then he was not ready yet. By learning through these experiences, Greg became much more valuable as a second chair leader at Willow Creek.

Second chair leaders need to learn to read and manage the first chair’s ego. They also need to accept that some of their needs may not be met until a later season. To be an effective second chair leader, you must be attuned to the constantly changing organizational currents that inevitably affect you and your role.

Second Paradox: Deep-Wide

As you move down the organization chart from the first chair, you find positions with ever more narrowly defined responsibilities. But effectiveness as a second chair leader requires that you see the big picture, even as you are continuing to serve with excellence in your functional role. This is the essence of the deep-wide paradox. But to be successful, they must move far beyond and above the silo mentality. This begins with breaking down the protective walls surrounding their own ministry area, by disclosing plans and activities, being honest about resource requirements, asking for input and feedback. You cannot be an effective second chair leader, and your ministry will not excel, if you spend all your time trapped inside your silo.

The most important concept for learning to see deep and wide, for developing second chair insights into your congregation, is *systems thinking*; a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’. Asking questions is the best way to gain a more complete perspective on your congregation. Lots of *why* questions. Also ask lots of *what-if* questions. A guiding principle of systems thinking is “solving the problem can make things worse.” The real problem is often not addressed with a quick-fix solution.

How are your relationships with other staff members and key leaders in your congregation or workplace? If they are not as strong as you would like, why is this the case? One major element that undermines these relationships is the lack of time spent developing them. Bill Hybels talks about managing relationships in all directions: north, south, east and west.

In *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, “A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable”

Fostering Teams from the Second Chair

The people and the potential teams in your areas of service are a great source of leverage. As you invest in them—through time, relationship, trust, prayer, and communication—the work that can be accomplished increases exponentially. It is slow, one-person-at-a-time process. But the benefits for you and the organization make it all worthwhile.

The second chair as Servant Leader

Any second chair can be a better leader by developing a “how can I help you?” attitude. As you seek ways to help, you find yourself filling any number of gaps.

The practical aspects are the final chapter of the deep-wide paradox. An effective second chair leader must demonstrate depth and competence in his assigned ministry. The respect and credibility that come from using his gifts form the platform which can extend his leadership influence.

Four Practices

1. *Be a pulse taker.*

2. *Be a vision amplifier. I to repeat clarify and reinforce the vision.*
3. *Be a leader multiplier.* Identifying and recruiting other leaders
4. *Be a gap filler.* Simply stated, when an important job needs to be tackled in a dynamic organization, the first chair looks for a trusted second chair to get it done.

In *How to Thrive in Associate Staff Ministry*, Kevin Lawson reports, “The associate staff members I surveyed and interviewed identified two aspects of their positions as helping them thrive...a dynamic position description [and] ...input in the church’s broader ministry” 92000, pp.58-59). This is the basic challenge for first chairs who want to produce deep and wide second chair leaders. It is a challenge that is worth taking.

Third Paradox: Contentment –Dreaming

Second chair leaders need to learn to practice a Joseph-like contentment and at the same time never lose sight of their dreams. If God’s call in your life is clear and strong, you will find yourself constantly balancing the contentment-dreaming paradox. Those who master this creative tension find a focus and energy that propels them forward in whatever way God is leading them.

Contentment in the second chair is your choice to stay and grow and excel, for a season, regardless of current circumstances. “Regardless of current circumstances” is a caution against leaving prematurely at the first bump in the road. It is also recognition that unstable times and uncertain days can yield some of the greatest lessons in ministry. Learn from your second chair experiences and apply them to your current and future ministry. As this happens, your colleagues, congregation, and first chair will all see you developing the potential that God has given you, and your ability to influence the organization will grow exponentially.

Sources of Contentment

Being in a ministry leadership role does not guarantee spiritual depth. In fact, the very demands of ministry can squeeze the spiritual vitality out of the leader’s life. Regardless of where you serve, allow time for the Spirit to sustain and strengthen your soul. If your daily walk is not rooted in Christ, contentment will always escape you. Another source of contentment is calling. Understanding your calling brings peace of mind for your ministry. It helps you persevere, discover your passion, and provide you with joy and fulfillment, especially in difficult seasons of ministry. To nurture healthy, vibrant, life-giving relationships that help them find rest and strength for the ministry seasons that lie ahead. The fruit of the ministry is a final source of contentment. The real fruit is not on quantitative measures but in changed lives.

Challenges to Contentment

Three of them are *lack of patience* with God’s timing, *lack of awareness* of God’s bigger picture, and *lack of skills* to do the work that is required.

Dreaming in the Second Chair

Dream cultivation plays a significant role in your leadership journey. If you can articulate your dream, how will you begin to fulfill it? Begin to lay out the road map ahead, clearly stating as best you can the steps for accomplishing this God- given dream. Use resources such as Andy Stanley’s *Visioneering*.

What are the key lessons of dream stewardship?:

- Be careful what you say and to whom you say it! “Walk before you talk; investigate before you initiate.”
- Check your ego at the door - Too many leaders second chair or otherwise, believe having a dream gives them the right to pursue it all costs. As they pursue, they alienate others and cause organizational havoc.
- Practice both now and later -God expects your best effort *now* so you will be prepared for all that He plans to do in and through you *later*.
- Trust God in the details

Mesh Your Dreams With Those of Your First Chair

If the first and second chair see the same vision for the ministry, God's blessings are released in a powerful way.

Supporting Your First Chair's Vision -Ultimately, this is what dreaming with your first chair should be: seeking God together and joining Him on an adventure forward in which you share the labor under the Lord's leadership.

Leaving the Second Chair

Leaving well is rarely easy, but it is certainly important.

Before You Arrive...the things you ask and say, learn and clarify have a direct bearing on your future success in this role. Your success as you serve has a direct bearing on how you leave.

"Should I stay, or Should I go?"

A matter of timing - ask the Holy Spirit to clearly reveal if it is time for you to leave, or if you still have more to learn in your current role. If you find confusion instead of clarity, now is probably not the right time to leave.

If you are in a position where you consistently are stymied in using the gifts God has given you, then it is impossible for you to be a good steward. Before you resign, however, distinguish between "not fully using your gifts at this time" and "having little prospect for ever using your gifts." Make sure you are leaving as a better leader, a better servant, and as a more mature Christ follower than when you started.

Leave a Legacy

To leave a legacy, you also have to develop others. If you do not, it will be difficult for the ministry to maintain its momentum in your absence.

Don't Set the Bridges Ablaze - Bless and Be Blessed

Ephesians 4:29

The departing leader needs to be able to bless the organization, including the first chair. He or she should receive a blessing as well. If you have taken the other steps that we describe in his chapter, these blessings will be a natural outcome.

Robert Quinn, in his insightful book *Deep Change*, "we must accept the fact that we have the power and the ability to change.... One person can make a difference. One person can make a deep change in an organization" If you doubt your ability to make a difference, reflect one more time on the story of Joseph. God used him to save not one but two nations. At times, Joseph could do nothing to control his destiny other than remain faithful to God.

PS. After each paradox in the book, there is a helpful section addressed to First Chair Leaders, helping them understand their role in the paradox.