



***RECOGNIZING THE
POWER DYNAMIC
IN LEADERSHIP***

by Keith Spurgin

Recognizing the Power Dynamic in Leadership

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I started genuinely following Jesus in college. After several years of spiritual mediocrity, partying, and generally just living for myself, Jesus met me in a powerful way in my college apartment. He led me into an undeniable life changing relationship with God and radical obedience to him.

After I graduated from college with a degree in Business Administration I was searching for the next step. Eventually Jesus led me to Youth With A Mission (YWAM) in Tyler, Texas where I met my wife (Susan), got deeply transformed, and realized I was a leader in some form or fashion. Those were intoxicating days of leading mission trips internationally, being taught by world class teachers, and investing in people that were often considerably older than me. Later we moved to Hong Kong and I became the right hand man to the leader of an international business/ministry that was a forerunner for what is now known as Business as Missions (BAM). We worked all over Asia and built a network of leaders and teams who were bringing the Kingdom to places that were off limits to traditional missions. It was a blast!

After five years in Asia we moved back to Texas and I served three and a half years as Associate Pastor at my home church. Our Pastor had a vision to plant a church and in 1999 we launched New Hope Church in Wylie, Texas. My plan was to be there five years and hand it off to another leader but God had different plans and we are still there. It's been an amazing adventure, seeing literally thousands of people come to Christ for the first time or come back to him after years away from the church. We've sent missionaries all over the world and now have a network of leaders and organizations in the non-profit and for profit spheres. I sometimes shake my head in awe of what God has done.

I never made a plan to be a leader. My heart has been and remains, to follow God's call and be faithful to him. There is an upside to not taking yourself too seriously; less assuming and a lack of entitlement. The downside is that you don't realize how much influence you have and how loud your voice is in people's hearts and minds. Over the years of leading, people would try to caution me about how much others are looking at me. I would think to myself, "I'm just Keith" or I would say, "Can't I just be a human

sometimes?” These responses seemed humble and self-effacing. In retrospect they were immature and naive. It was as if I could create an antidote to the celebrity pastor syndrome by simply refuting it verbally.

Over the years people would say things like:

“You don’t realize how much influence you have.”

“When you walk in the room everyone looks to you.”

“In a group discussion people will share ideas but they are really waiting to see what you think.”

I remember being incredibly frustrated when people would say things like that to me. I would explain that I’m just a human being like them, flawed, broken, and I just want to be me, not some spiritual superhero. I cringed and recoiled when people would say that my words carried more weight than others in the organization. I honestly hated it. I never wanted to be, “God’s man of power for the hour”. Whenever people call me Pastor I always tell them, “My name is Keith, feel free to call me that.” When people ask if I am “The Pastor” of the church I reply, “I’m one of them.” These have been attempts to keep myself off the pedestal that people inevitably put you on as a leader, and especially as a point leader. Despite my most fervent efforts over the years to keep this from happening, it happened anyway.

Over the last several years I’ve begun realizing more and more how much impact my voice has. Not because I always want it to, although there are times I do. Sometimes I want to push something through that others are resisting. At one point I even felt myself just giving in and thinking, “It is what it is.” What I’ve realized is that whether I want my voice to be louder and stronger than others or not, it is. Unfortunately, that attitude of throwing my hands up was as unhelpful as denial had been previously.

The Megaphone Principle

My friend and mentor Doug Fike, refers to this syndrome as, The Megaphone Principle. If you are married you know this principle well. Your voice has way more potency in the ears and heart of your spouse than anyone else’s. You can be saying something as gently as possible but for your partner it sounds like a blaring horn, especially if it’s negative or corrective. When I first started speaking publicly, Susan would never give me any feedback. She assumed that so many other people were sharing with me that I didn’t need to hear from her. I finally told her, “Your voice is the loudest voice in my head. If I don’t hear from you, it almost doesn’t matter what anyone else says or thinks.” This is the Megaphone Principle.

As a leader your voice becomes a megaphone to those you lead. What you say, what you don’t say, and your body language are all observed and evaluated through the lens of people’s authority issues, expectations, vain imaginations, past experiences, maturity level, and their own level of identity with the Father.

It has taken me decades to grapple with how true this is. As I said earlier, all I ever wanted to do was to serve God and be faithful. Yet, leadership comes at a great price.

As you read this, I can't help but wonder if you are thinking something similar to what I've often thought - "This isn't fair. Why can't I just be me? People should be far more concerned about what God says than what I say."

“A lot of people want to be a leader until they become a leader.”

This is part of what led me to this saying I share with leaders regularly - a lot of people want to be a leader until they become a leader.

As a young man I was so naive about leadership. I would listen to leaders speaking in my YWAM training schools. They were leading international organizations, traveling the world, and influencing people on multiple

continents and yet they would always talk about how difficult it is to be a leader. As a young buck in my early 20's I remember thinking, "Yeah right. You're doing these amazing things, seeing the world, you've got hundreds if not thousands of followers - what could be hard about that?"

Life has taught me that I was incredibly unaware. I was unaware of 2 things primarily:

1. The cost of leadership

My good friend Jeff Forrester recently sent me the following quote: "If you want to make everyone happy don't be a leader, sell ice cream!"

I learned from Jesus' life that the more people there are that love you, the more people there are who hate you. It is the nature of influence.

Some people hate you because they are jealous - the Pharisees (the religious and political leaders of Jesus' day) seethed at the fact the people loved Jesus and simply tolerated them. John 12:9-11

Others, because you didn't meet their expectations - Peter thought Jesus should avoid death at any cost. Matthew 16:21-23

Still others, because you did something that hurt them or disappointed them - Judas was disappointed and hurt by Jesus even though Jesus didn't do anything wrong. Matthew 26:6-16

Regardless of why, it is a difficult and painful burden to bear.

2. The voice of a leader

As a leader, your voice is always louder than you think and more influential than you realize. That means the tone of your voice, the volume of your voice, and the content of your words are all exceedingly important. Your body language is far more impactful than you realize. You may be saying something meant to encourage or challenge but if your hands are flailing or your brow is furrowed the person you are talking to is probably hearing, "You've disappointed me" or "I am angry with you."

The Process

In my world sabbaticals are a part of our culture. We encourage leaders to take sabbaticals about every seven years. This allows the organization to breathe without the pressure of the visionary leader and it allows the leader time and space to 'be' rather than 'do'. The 'being' allows time and space for relational upgrades in the leader's family, especially if they are married, with their kids, and with close friends. It gives room for the leader to hear God without the pressure of leadership decisions getting in the way. It also creates a space to find out who you are without your leadership hat on.

In 2021 I went on a sabbatical that I thought was going to be long; perhaps six months. At the end of six months my sabbatical coaches said they felt it needed to be extended. I thought they were crazy. I vehemently disagreed with them. However, I learned a long time ago that accountability only matters when you disagree. If we always agree, is it really accountability or just a vague concept with no teeth? These people had proven to me over the years that they love me, my family, and the people I lead; so I trusted them. I'm so thankful I did. The second half of sabbatical was another six months but it's where all the big changes began to happen.

“I learned a long time ago that accountability only matters when you disagree.”

At that time, I had been the point leader of the church we started for 22 years. In the early days of leading I had no idea what I was doing. I remember almost every day being on the floor crying out to God for help and direction. Prayers like, “God if you don't come through we are sunk!” Every decision felt consequential to our survival as a community and as an organization. My leadership team were all volunteers but because I had no one else to lean on, they were my staff. We sought God together, wrestled decisions to the ground until we were all in agreement, and stood behind those decisions as one. It was a stressful time but an amazing season. We were doing life together to the point that our kids felt more like cousins than just friends. I was Uncle Keith and my wife was Auntie Susan. My kids had Aunt Lynn, Uncle Stan, Aunt Patti, and Uncle Terry.

Over time, as the organization grew and full time staff came on board, the leadership team delegated more and more responsibility. These changes were needed and appropriate. However, with staff development and more distance from that leadership team I became more and more clearly “the leader.” It wasn't wrong or bad, in fact organizational development and growth require these system adjustments to function well.

The Downside

When these adjustments happen, the point leader naturally becomes more separated from those original relationships that provided organic support, encouragement, and accountability. Without incredible intentionality a delta develops between the leader and the support system designed, not to control him/her but to protect him/her from the power dynamic that is inevitable.

In their amazing book, *The Way of the Dragon or The Way of the Lamb* by Jamin Grogan and Kyle Strobel, they say it this way:

Power is the kryptonite of leadership. On one hand you need healthy power to move things forward, but because we are flawed humans, that same power that creates momentum and movement becomes the deadly tool the enemy uses to harm individuals who are trying to speak to and push back against that power. This is true even if the leader's motives are quite pure. It is easy to point to leaders who have abused their power intentionally and feel like they are the only ones whose power has damaged people. It's just not true.

I can't think of a single time in my leadership life where I set out to damage another person. Yet, I can think of many times I have damaged other people with the power that I wielded.

Through the sabbatical process and counseling, I've come to realize that no matter how well-meaning I am in any given situation, the strength of my voice and my position in people's lives creates a power dynamic that is completely out of proportion. It reminds me of the cartoon with the big bully holding the little guy's head while he swings wildly. The little guy is unable to reach the bully no matter how hard he tries or how hard he swings.

Founding Leaders

This is even more true with founding leaders who get a lot of credit for organizations that change the market or change people's lives; usually more credit than they deserve because there is almost always a team of people who helped to make it all happen. At the same time, founders pay a heavy price to come up with an idea, start from scratch, and launch an organization. The moxie required to launch-out and say, "We are going to do this" is real and worth celebrating. It takes a team, but the team wouldn't come together without the founder. That's true of founders in business, church, non-profit, ngo's, and education. Founders have to deal with the naysayers, critics, and the voices in their own heads that tell them they are crazy. The drive required to start from nothing is unique and costly.

When you've paid that price and had some level of success, you never really feel like things are stable. No matter how large the organization becomes, the founder always remembers what it took to get there. In the back of every founder's mind is the thought that this could all go away in a moment:

One really bad decision
One big controversy
One indiscretion
One significant economic recession
One too many social media rants

As a result, the founder feels a responsibility to hold things together. In a Kingdom dynamic, the founder also bears the burden of stewarding what they've been given by God. As cynical as our culture has become about leadership, this is a noble desire. This is also where the problems come.

Think of it this way:

Founder's desire to steward well
+ Founder's ignorance of the power dynamic
= Unhealthy culture

Again, this doesn't require a nefarious leader, but to the people under that leader, it can feel deplorable. I have an extremely high value for team health, team decisions, and team feedback. I've taught it, promoted it, and asked for it. Our culture was healthier than most and yet, after coming back from sabbatical I found out there were things my team wasn't telling me. It wasn't until I confessed that I had allowed my pride and my agenda to drive decisions, brought in trusted outside oversight/coaches, and then invited the team members to give feedback about how my agenda and pride had affected them, did they really begin to open up about the power dynamic that had been negatively impacting them and our culture for years.

They told me....

... About times I had devalued them with critical comments about something they were doing.

... About times I made them feel like I wasn't listening to anything they were saying.

... About times I ignored their red flags about a decision I wanted to make and we all paid the consequences.

... About times I gave them feedback in the middle of something they were leading which caused them to doubt themselves and lead ineffectively the rest of the meeting.

... About times they were going through difficult things and I didn't seem to care.

... About how I had created a cult of personality around my gifts and intellect.

... About times I had ignored the prophetic voice because I had a different agenda.

... About times they had asked for friendship and I made it about what they could do for me organizationally.

This feedback was painful to hear. It hurt. It grieved my heart. It caused me to question myself as a leader and as a person. There have definitely been some dark nights of the soul. It's really terrible to realize your best efforts to do good are creating

pain for people you love. Most importantly, it motivated me to really change. As my friend Chris Turner says, “Pain is a terribly effective motivator.” I’m still working on those changes, but I’m committed to do the humbling work of figuring out how to still be me, while increasing my empathy quotient. It would be easy to go to the extremes; become a passive leader because I don’t want to hurt people or be offended by the feedback and refuse to change.

I believe there is a better place—where I am still leading effectively but with much more self awareness and compassion.

I wasn’t completely ignorant of the power I wielded and the pain it caused others. I don’t think most leaders are totally unaware. We get used to it. Over time it becomes normalized and left unchecked it grows. I was in a situation where we had a robust outside oversight structure so that helped me not get completely out in the weeds, but without that, who knows what might have happened.

As a person following a strong charismatic leader it might be easy to see how much power they wield. It is unbelievably obvious to you and therefore natural to think your leader can see it too. Oftentimes they don’t, at least not fully, and yet none of us are just a victim. I will wrap up with some questions that have helped me recognize more of this power dynamic and will hopefully help other leaders too. For these questions to be helpful you’ll have to be brutally honest with yourself. To do that you may need to invite some other people to answer some of these questions with you. If you invite others into this, pre-commit yourself to not react and to not treat honest people as if you would like them to be dishonest.

- Do people ever warn or caution you about how significant your voice is in the lives of those you lead?
- Do your team decisions almost always turn out like you hoped?
- Do other people come up with significant ideas that actually get implemented?
- Are some of your most gifted people leaving your organization?
- Do you have a healthy and involved outside oversight relationship?
- Does that outside oversight have real teeth? In other words, what happens when you disagree with them?
- Does your team have open and invited access to that oversight?
- How long has it been since you stepped away from leadership (no physical presence, phone, or email contact) for at least a month?

- When was the last time a substantial leader confronted you?
- When was the last time you asked someone to forgive you and actually felt some of their pain?
- In your head, are you the only person in your organization qualified to lead it?
- If you are married, ask your spouse if he/she feels loved, listened to, and treasured.
- If you have kids, ask them what they think is the most important thing in your life and where they rank on your priority list.

I want to reiterate that how you respond to the answers people give you tells you and them whether you are “getting” this or not.

If you can't seem to get your reactions under control perhaps a round of professional counseling and some time with an inner healing ministry like Restoring the Foundations could help you significantly. I personally needed both of those things to help me make improvements after sabbatical. We aren't designed to fix ourselves on our own. We are designed to lean on others who help us get better by becoming more like Jesus.

You can do this. It won't be perfect but you can get better. Do the work. Like most really important things, it is not easy but it is worth the effort.