

Proverbial Principles of Leadership

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Proverbial Principles of Leadership

Introduction:

The focus of this work is the practical application of the wisdom of Proverbs to those who lead and manage in church or other Christian organizations. Fourteen different “Proverbial Principles of Leadership” will be identified and discussed.

Principle One: Learn to Learn

The opening verses make it clear that the premise of Proverbs is that wisdom, knowledge and understanding are available to the one who is a learner. The person who “gets it” (a man of understanding) actively pursues acquisitions of the inner person: wisdom and instruction; discernment and understanding; prudence in place of naivety. This yields an “inner man” who practices righteousness, justice and equity (Proverbs 1:1-6; 2:9).

As such, Proverbs abounds with practical leadership principles for those wise enough to hear and heed (1:8). The primary principle has already been mentioned: a key to wisdom, effectiveness and success is being a constant learner.

Indeed, the first seven chapters set the tone for the book (and for those seeking the rewards of its teachings) by calling for the reader to listen and learn. (1:8, 2:1, 3:1, 4:1, 5:1, 6:1, 7:1). There are no less than fourteen leadership related themes in Proverbs, all rest upon this first theme, learn to learn.

Principle Two: Understand Wealth

Wealth; making and accumulating it, is the prime focus of “for profit” enterprises. While church and Christian organizations champion different and more lasting goals than wealth that

seems to “sprout wings” and disappear (Proverbs 23:5), a proper understanding of significant financial resources is essential.

First and foremost, leaders in Christian organizations must realize that financial provision is from God, and given in his wisdom (Proverbs 8:18). Tithing then, (3:9) is an essential personal practice for leaders who wish to acknowledge God as their source.

A strong work ethic co-incides with achieving wealth: “...the hand of the diligent makes rich” (10:4). Churches and Christian organizations tend to depend on contributions for income. Leaders in those settings must demonstrate the same resourcefulness as their donors did in earning and accumulating them.

Proper resource management is admonished in Proverbs 27:23 (“Know well the condition of your flocks, and pay attention to your herds.”). Contributors’ confidence grows as not-for-profit leaders display financial diligence.

While material resources are an important “fuel” for ministry, ministry leaders must remain focused on what truly matters. Especially in uncertain economic times, our “trust” is never on financial stability (Proverbs 11:28...”He who trusts riches will fall.”), but on God who orders the economy and supercedes it. We must never become like the foolish man of means, who over-imagines the stability his wealth brings.

Principle Three: Poverty is a Result

Principle three is not an “always and air-tight” axiom. Extenuating and tragic circumstances can prevail which impoverish otherwise sound lives or organizations. Indeed, Jesus alluded to the inescapable nature of poverty in Matthew 26:11 (“For you always have the

poor with you...”). Proverbs also encourages compassion, as in 22:9: “He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his bread to the poor.”

Proverbs makes it clear that there are worse things than being poor. Certainly, being poor, but having integrity is better than having wealth but being perverse in speech (19:1), than being a liar (19:22), or living in physical comfort but emotional turmoil (“Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it than a house full of feasting with strife.” Proverbs 17:1).

Still, wise leaders will be aware that impoverished financial circumstances are often a result of poor practices. Proverbs repeatedly cites a weak work ethic and avoidance of proper action as poverty producers (6:10, 11, 24:30-34).

Negligence is a cause of poverty (10:4), which serves to remind leaders to do their work in a proactive, diligent way (Romans 12:8). Occasionally, leaders are approached with suggestions of income sources that seem too good to be true. Wisdom dictates that leaders beware, since negative consequences await those who “make haste to get rich” (Proverbs 28:20).

Likewise, clear priorities must drive leaders, lest they become distracted. Such distraction to lesser pursuits can become financially disastrous: “He who pursues worthless things lacks sense” (12:11) or “He who follows empty pursuits will have poverty in plenty” (28:19).

Principle Four: Dangers Surrounding Debt

According to Proverbs 22:7, “Mastercard” is properly named: “The borrower becomes the lender’s slave.” Debt is dangerous, and leads to financial bondage. Proverbs also warns against co-signing on loans (6:1-5). Proverbs 22:26 and 11:15 can even be seen as rationale against investments as historically conservative as the bond market (“He who is guarantor for a stranger will surely suffer for it”).

Proverbs certainly proposes fiscally conservative practices. Indeed, a heavy debt load can begin to dictate activity. Decisions are made on the basis of “What we can afford...along with our debt load?” instead of “What can we afford in light of our vision?” Wise leaders of ministry related organizations should be debt averse. Likewise, care should be exercised in where to invest ministry funds awaiting future use.

Until the financial crisis of 2008, bonds and money market funds have been seen as among the safest investments. Indeed, they are a modern day version of being “surety” for a stranger. Once again, current events validate the wisdom of Biblical truth: “He who is guarantor for a stranger will surely suffer for it,” (Proverbs 11:15).

Principle Five: God Hates Divisiveness

Among the list of seven things God hates in Proverbs 6, one can be especially damaging to a church or Christian organization: “...one who spreads strife among brothers.” Truthlessness is also mentioned twice in this list, but churches and Christian organizations tend to see this wrong more clearly. A person who is divisive often goes unchecked in church, or Christian organizations.

Few offenses are more damaging than divisiveness. The strongest organization and most vibrant church can be immobilized, and even destroyed by someone who spreads strife. Leaders can encourage diversity of opinions, personalities and methods, but must be guardians of organizational unity. So lethal it is to church/ministry health that the Apostle Paul admonishes Titus to “reject a divisive man after a first and second warning” (3:10).

Principle Six: Straight Talk for Receptive Listeners

The words of Proverbial wisdom are “straightforward” (8:9). To a person with understanding, such helpful counsel is very valuable “like apples of gold in settings of silver,” (25:11). However, as “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder” the value of words of wisdom is dependant upon the wisdom and openness of the one who hears. It requires a certain sense of wisdom to realize the value of correction, and to be open to receive it (9:9). Yet, those who grow learn to minimize defensiveness and hear.

On the other hand, Proverbs labels as “stupid” the one who hates correction (12:1). Such a foolish “scoffer” has contemptuous disregard for the one who brings correction (15:12). It literally does not pay for a leader to correct this type of person, and Proverbs 9:8 advises against it. The leader (or person) who persists in confronting such a defensive, sarcastic person is only bringing more hatred upon themselves. Proverbs 22:10 suggests an organization/group will be more harmonious once the contentious scoffer is removed.

Principle Seven: Integrity Matters

Having a sense of integrity implies being morally intact, cohesive and consistent with one’s values and beliefs. Such a person need not struggle with the dangers of duplicity. Their yes, is yes, their word is their bond.

Proverbs 10:9 rightly identifies that such integrity brings security to the one who lives and leads this way. This “moral compass” serves to guide in difficult times and decision processes (11:3).

The leader of integrity accumulates a priceless asset: “A good name is to be more desired than great wealth” (22:1). In fact, integrity can’t be bought, and poverty is better with integrity than riches with compromise (19:1).

Related to the integrity of an individual’s character, are individual business and leadership practices. In four verses, Proverbs speaks of just weights to reinforce “behaviors of integrity” (11:1, 16:11, 20:10, 23). Wise leaders realize that integrity matters, even when things seem “small” and insignificant, since “all the weights of the bag are His concern,” even the small ones/details (16:11).

Principle Eight: Generosity Pays

It’s unfortunate to extol a virtue of unselfishness by promoting personal benefits, but being generous toward others definitely reaps personal rewards. One of God’s fundamental laws of leadership and success seems to be that giving is a key to what we receive.

Proverbs 11:25 identifies generosity with prosperity. Proverbs 22 further specifies (v. 9, 16) that generosity, particularly toward the poor, brings blessings. Church and ministry leaders do well to see the value of directing some of their efforts and/or resources to the poor. A spiritual law of blessing will be in effect.

Principle Nine: Beware of Greed

Christian leaders lead in contrast to, and in the context of, our larger non-Christian culture. Hopefully, diligence is exercised within the ministry context to preserve and promote Christian values.

Still, the larger cultural context constantly threatens encroachment. Christian leaders are free to use leadership and management methods that are found in non-ministry organizations, provided they are situationally appropriate, Biblically compatible, and God directed.

However, in the relentless pressures and pace of leadership, caution can be unintentionally compromised, and inappropriate influences begin to take hold. One such influence that can make its way into Christian organizations is greed.

Resources are in constant demand, and seemingly short supply. As such, leaders can yield to manipulative fundraising tactics, inappropriate financial practices, or simply a prayerless lack of dependence on God's provision.

When this occurs, leaders can place undue importance on key (even questionable) donors, on fundraising schemes, or even wrong management activities. Headlines remind us just often enough that the finest of leaders may fall prey to "greed" disguised as "need" and given heed through lack of prayer.

This warning is found repeatedly in Proverbs and perhaps best stated in 11:6: "The righteousness of the upright will deliver them, but the treacherous will be caught in their own greed," (see also 15:27).

Principle Ten: Lead for the Long Term

Although not explicitly stated as such, this principle based on the wisdom of Proverbs 13:22 and 17:2, calls leaders and managers to do so beyond the "short term" of today. It's one thing to be a success here and now, but true success should be sustainable into the future.

Such is the sensitivity emphasized in 13:22 when it states “A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children...” Again, this is in stark contrast (as is principle nine) to the “profit-taking” immediate gratification culture we live in.

Successful leadership provides a vision for the future, and manages resources for now and later. Successful “Proverbial” leadership is not so consumed in today that it goes into debt that tomorrow can’t afford.

Long Term leadership knows the value of discerning, defining, and following God’s plan. This includes facilities, staffing, mission and passion, and is addressed in the next principle.

Principle Eleven: Discern, Define and Follow God’s Plan

Proverbs 11:14 is perhaps considered the “classic” verse regarding the importance of a sense of vision: “Where there is no vision, the people fall (perish), but in abundance of counselors there is victory.” This cornerstone verse on vision fits well with other Proverbial axioms, and allows some general evidences to emerge.

First, vision is essential to any organization, ministry or people group. We must have a sense of direction and purpose.

Second, vision formulation is a process. First and foremost, vision must be prayerfully discerned: “commit your works to the Lord, and your plans will be established” (Proverbs 16:3).

Another dimension to the formulation process is seeking Godly counsel and input to the vision:

“...in an abundance of counselors there is victory” (11:14).

“...with many counselors (plans) succeed” (15:22).

“...prepare plans by consultation” (20:18).

Such prayerful discernment and wise consultation will help avoid:

“...a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (16:25).

A **third** “Proverbial” guideline for vision is one of patient timeliness. Proverbs 21:5 and 18:13 both warn against “too soon” timing, whether in taking action or communicating prematurely:

“The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty” (21:25). And “He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him” (18:13).

Wise leadership prayerfully seeks God’s vision for the future. Such vision is “sounded out” and clarified with wise counsel. The vision is adequately discerned, deliberately pursued, and done with a sense of appropriate urgency, but not irresponsibly hurried.

Principle Twelve: The “Ox Mess” of Progress

Proverbs 14:4 is likely an overlooked, underappreciated, and perhaps altogether missed truth of successful leadership and management. Growth and progress produces a certain amount of “mess” (let the reader read into that, smile).

Solomon uses an analogy. Its easy to keep the barn neat, tidy and clean when there’s no farming being done and no messy oxen (work animals) to clean up after. However, in a busy, productive, agricultural operation requiring toil and muscle (big-strong ox style), you’re going to have “mess” and clean up to deal with. A more contemporary analogy might be an auto service center.

It's fairly easy to have clean concrete floors (perhaps even freshly painted gray) when no cars ever come to the shop for service. No grease or dirt gets on floors, tools or hands when cars aren't being fixed.

An insightful ministry leader understands this principle, and expects a productive mess. When growing, moving forward, and bearing fruit, things will get messy. Processes and procedures aren't always "neat and tidy." "Relational messes" can also occur, and skilled "cleanup" is required.

To the leader "in a mess," it's not necessarily bad news. On the contrary, it's more likely to be a negative indicator if operations are always "neat and tidy," if policies and procedures are never tested, and if "everyone is always happy." There's a certain amount of "you-know-what" when things are productive!

Principle Thirteen: Save Enough

Proverbs 21:20 and 23:25 both extol the virtue of saving resources. Proverbs 30:25 debunks the myth that savings is only possible by those of strong position (financial, physical or otherwise).

Here, ants...small in stature and strength, are still wise and capable enough to save in times of plenty, anticipating seasons of scarcity. Too often, a subsistence mentality pervades the mindset of leaders and managers in financially under-resourced environments.

Yet, Proverbs 30:25 implies it is insight, diligence and timing that is more determinative of fiscal success than financial stature. Together, with persistence, resources can be properly accumulated and consumed in a timely way.

Proverbs 21:20 speaks not only in favor of proper saving, (“there is precious treasure and oil in the dwelling of the wise”) but also against a “have-it-spend-it” mindset (“but the foolish man swallows/spends it up”). Too many leaders see resources as “to be spent.” While it is true that ministry does not exist to accumulate resources for resources’ sake, many must be managed.

Money now (in summer) may need to be portioned off for needs later (in financial “winter” seasons); or for vision that has been anticipated and is approaching. Proverbially wise leaders learn how much should be spent, and how much should be saved for upcoming needs and opportunities.

Principle Fourteen: “Dysfunction” Damages

Principle fourteen includes a panorama of concerns that leaders and managers need to be aware of. Too often our society minimizes bad (sinful) behavior under the label of dysfunction. A compassionate response is often appropriate when behavior requires grace. However, a response that corrects and doesn’t enable is necessary.

Proverbs 29:24 warns of partnering with those who succeed through dishonest gain. Collusion is often required, and consequences will surely follow. As such, whether it be trying to “work with” a thief in the workplace (rather than deal with them), or hoping to prosper through questionable financial partnerships, both are foolish. “He who is partner with a thief hates his own life”.

Proverbs 23:29-35 provides a good “reality check” of the sinful and pervasive dysfunction of drunkenness. The state of the drunken man is one that is separated from the reality of a life of sobriety and the safety of a life of moderation.

Leaders and managers need to realize that a “drinking problem” introduces this Proverbial lack of safety into the workplace. Intentional, wise intervention is a must. Regretful damage is the alternative.

Proverbs 29:11 raises concern over habitual inappropriate emotional behavior. Even the most well adjusted person may on rare occasion lose their temper or display an emotional outburst that doesn't fit the circumstances.

However, the person who habitually allows their emotions to control them (in this case, anger) is foolish, and to be avoided. Hiring practices need to help anticipate and avoid such individuals. Sound management and leadership deals with them when their disruptions affect the workplace.

Conclusion:

This brief survey shows the amazing and pervasive practical application of Proverbs to the work of leaders and managers. These fourteen “Proverbial Principles,” apply directly to organizational settings.

Wisdom indicates that the rest of the Proverbs also indirectly impact the ministry environment. A Proverb-practicing person will lead and manage more effectively as their entire life and personhood shows the refinement of wisdom.

