

KEVIN WILEY

## PLAYING SECOND TROMBONE

The hall is packed. Breath-taking music surrounds me as only it can when I'm here in one of the best seats in the house—at the back of the stage in the trombone section. As I play my favorite piece with the wind symphony, I'm almost as mesmerized as the audience. But I manage to keep my attention focused, because I want to be ready for the trombone cadenza. I love the meandering yet purposeful grace of this unaccompanied freestyle solo. The moment arrives. I take a deep breathe and—the trombonist beside me starts playing the cadenza while I listen. First chair always plays the solos; I'm second chair.

Second never does the great work. Second never gets the glory. Second trombone, second fiddle, second string, second place, second rate, second in command, factory second—just a second! What's wrong with second?

While my Webster's doesn't have an entry for "second trombone," it does define "second fiddle" as "one that plays a supporting or subservient role." Ditto with second trombone. Or second anything. Always supporting, always serving, always behind the one who shines, but never taking the lead.

I really did spend quite a few years in school playing second trombone. And what happened in the music room has been a fitting metaphor for much of my life so far. I have seldom found myself taking the lead in things. In childhood, I followed my older brother. As a teenager, I was influenced by friends more often than I influenced them—occasionally to my detriment and theirs. As an adult, I have always worked for someone. My name seems to be engraved deeply in the back of chair number two.

Several years ago I chose to embark on a career change. I was going to write and edit my way into the publishing world. And so it was that after nearly a year of résumés, writing samples, preliminary interviews,

and not enough freelance work, I finally found a good job—as an administrative assistant in an academic department at a university. This wasn't exactly the job that I had dreamed of. It would have boosted my self esteem to call it second chair! Eventually, though, I found that particular second chair to fit my frame quite comfortably. And it fit me even better as I grew to understand that I could simply occupy second chair, or I could become a second chair leader. I learned that those of us who sit in second chair have a responsibility to be second chair leaders.

What's a second chair leader? According to Mike Bonem, co-author of *Leading from the Second Chair*, a second chair leader is “someone in a subordinate role whose influence on others adds value throughout the organization” (quoted in Boyle, 2008, p. 7).

Bonem is right on the money—a second chair leader plays a “subordinate role,” working for a leader. She may truly be second chair, i.e., assistant director, vice president, or associate pastor. Or he might be a farm hand, custodian, data entry clerk, or, like me, an administrative assistant. But whatever the venue, the distinguishing feature that makes second chair occupants into second chair leaders is their ability to influence others—to lead—in a way that benefits the organization for which they work.

And so as a second chair leader I found that I had to keep a delicate balance between being a follower and being a leader. As a lifelong second chair I was accustomed to taking orders from the boss. But I had to learn how to take the lead in appropriate ways and under the right circumstances. I was facing the conundrum that is the root of what Bonem and Patterson (2005) have called the “three paradoxes” of second chair leadership.

The first paradox is the need to simultaneously be a bold initiator and a faithful follower. In my administrative assistant job, for example, my leader expected me to act with some autonomy, leading out in the projects and processes that were the stuff of my job. She gave me the conditional authority to take charge of my work. At the same time, I had to be ready to take direction from her. Sometimes she came to me with a project that preempted “my” project. At such a moment I had to trust her and choose to faithfully work for the good of the department and the people that we served. As a loyal follower, I gave her all the material and emotional support I could.

Second is the deep vs. wide paradox, the attempt to keep my feet on the ground while having an aerial view at the same time. As an admin-

istrative assistant I was often by necessity immersed in the nitty-gritty details of procedures, budgets, supplies, and information. “I have to buckle down and reconcile this monthly budget report.” At the same time, though, in order to be an effective second chair leader, I needed to see the big picture. I had to understand the reasons behind the tasks I performed. “How much money will we need to save for the conference we are planning to put on later this year?” I needed to see my leader’s vision and know her goals.

Finally, as a second chair leader I wrestled with the paradox of contentment versus dreaming. On the one side, I needed to reconcile myself to being “just an administrative assistant.” I learned to find value and satisfaction in doing my work. In my second chair position, I learned to attach myself to my leader’s dream and make it my own. To a point. While I could be content with supporting my leader, I could not afford to choke my own dreams in the process. So I also strived to be more, to do more, to make a contribution. As my leader and I came to understand my strengths and gifts, we worked together to make them fit into her dreams. I dreamed of work with words; she wanted top-notch newsletters and web pages. So even as I was thrilled to get paid for writing and editing, my leader was pleased to let me create monthly newsletters and upgrade the department webpage. By dovetailing my dreams with her dreams, I managed to dream and be content at the same time.

There’s an amazing YouTube video that features a quartet of trombonists playing John Phillip Sousa’s patriotic “Stars and Stripes Forever,” a march that is usually played by an entire band. Each of these four young ladies plays a different part—one plays the melody, another plays the bass, the third harmonizes with that, and the fourth actually plays the fast-warbling descant that is usually performed by a piccolo. Together, they sound like far more than the four trombonists that they are. Though only one musician is playing the melody, it takes all four of them to perform the march.

I started a new job last winter; while I’m no longer an administrative assistant, I wouldn’t call my new job a first chair position. But that’s not a problem, because if I’ve learned anything from my many years sitting in second chair, it’s that I can be a second chair leader.

## REFERENCES

- Boyle, T. (2008, Winter). Who’s really in charge? How to survive—and thrive—when leading from the second chair. *Willow*, 15(1), 6-9.
- Bonem, M., & Patterson, R. (2005). *Leading from the second chair*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.