LEADING WITH A LIMP: TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF YOUR MOST POWERFUL WEAKNESS

By DAN B. ALLENDER

Reviewed by Michael J. Aufderhar

Although an introductory chapter entitled "What Are You in For?" may just slightly raise one eyebrow of a reader starting into Dan Allender's *Leading with a Limp,* by the time the reader gets through chapter one, "A Leadership Confession," it will be clear that these are not just clever titles to draw the reader in. Rather, they are a first hint of the unique frankness and vulnerability found in this book. In his "confession" Allender wastes no time in pulling the curtain on his own leadership secret woes and pitfalls as president of Mars Hill Graduate School in Seattle, Washington, and he challenges every leading reader to consider his or her own real, personal, unvarnished, uncovered responses to five leadership realities: crisis, complexity, betrayal, loneliness, and weariness. His core assumption is that "*to the degree you face and name and deal with your failures as a leader; to that same extent you will create an environment conducive to growing and retaining productive and committed colleagues*" (p. 2, author's emphasis). He states that this kind of frank leadership confession is a strange paradox in that, "to the degree you attempt to hide or dissemble your weaknesses, the more you will need to control those you lead, and the more insecure you will become, and the more rigidity you will impose—prompting the ultimate departure of your best people" (p. 3).

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Five Painful Realities of Leadership

For Allender a leader is "*anyone* who wrestles with an uncertain future on behalf of others—anyone who uses her gifts, talents, and skills to influence the direction of others for the greater good" (p. 25). While this definition includes everyone from mothers, fathers, teachers and pastors to various academics, professionals and CEOs, it is a difficult calling "to be reluctant, limping, chief-sinner leaders, and even more to be stories. . . . He [the Apostle Paul] calls us to be a living portrayal of the very gospel we beseech others to believe" (p. 56). We can only do this through how we relate to five universal challenges every leader faces. Most respond to these challenges in predictable but faulty ways. So Allender describes alternative effective responses and what he believes is the tipping point (Gladwell, 2002) into an effective response for each one.

The first challenge is crisis. For Allender, crisis involves the two elements of danger and shame. "A crisis is more than a mere threat; it presents the danger of ruin" (p. 65). Most leaders will respond with a cowardice that will do almost anything to cast blame elsewhere. The tipping point to the effective response of courage is brokenness, which is only achieved by "falling off our throne" (p. 70).

Allender's second reality of leadership is complexity. When faced with real complexities, competing values, significant ambiguities, and nerve-racking uncertainties, leaders typically respond with rigidity. Rigidity is a "narrowing of options that pretends to simplify the complexity. . . . A refusal to reframe" (p. 85). Allender says the tipping point to depth is foolishness—which is the willingness to "operate outside tradition and conventional wisdom, but wise enough to take advantage of any voice no matter its source" (p. 89). Opening up to chaos and widely divergent sources of ideas is what opens the creativity that is needed to deal with complexity.

Betrayal is the third leadership reality. Allender does not sugarcoat any of his discussion of betrayal. Several pages of raw description include statements such as this:

> A leader who has either not faced his wounds [from betrayal] or acknowledged the defenses he has erected as protection from harm may become cruel, defensive, belittling, arrogant, emotionally insulated. . . . The more powerful the person's leadership position, the more likely it is that the leader has narcissistic characteristics. (p. 96-97)

He says often people take on leadership out of a desire to rectify or amend the suffering of past betrayal. Sometimes this starts out as a noble purpose, but then when new betrayal comes into the picture, self-absorption is the natural response. Allender concludes that the only way to lead on through betrayal is by and through grace and gratitude.

"All leaders are lonely," asserts Allender, "but few are lonely for good reasons" (p. 111). He distinguishes legitimate loneliness from self-inflicted isolation. Legitimate loneliness is what goes with the territory of leadership. For example, 70 percent of the leaders Allender surveyed said they had experienced the isolation that comes from firing an employee and not being able to tell others why. So leaders stop letting themselves feel lonely, and often toughen their skin and ignore the broken parts. "This leads to a culture that divides the heart from the task, one's personhood from the work . . . [which] creates a culture of hiding and manipulative politicizing" (p. 116). Allender concludes that honest hunger is the tipping point to openness—the preferred response to loneliness. Openness is necessary so that people can both care for your sorrows and celebrate your delights (p. 123).

Unlimited need and expanding opportunities both pull leaders into working to the point of exhaustion—to where they experience the fifth reality of leadership, weariness. Many leaders thrive under pressure, work better under impossible deadlines and feel their greatest creativity when the pressure is on. However, this all takes its toll and leaders need some way to be re-energized. "It isn't even that we are overextended and need more balanced lives. . . . We have lost sight of our callings, and far more, of the One who calls" (p. 130). Therefore, "the tipping point that returns us to our First Love is disillusionment about all our lesser loves" (p. 130). He concludes that "when you admit that you can't do everything, you are then free to more fully embrace the call of God" (p. 136).

Chapter 10 is the hinge point of *Leading with a Limp.* Allender calls readers to decide three things: (1) Is it true that the only way to lead is with a limp? (2) Is leading in this radically inverted way for me? And, (3) Is now the time in my current leadership context to become the limping leader, the chief sinner of my organization? The rest of the book is how to do it if the answer is yes to all three questions.

Allender writes that the success of the organization is not the most

important purpose of the limping leader; rather, the maturing of character is paramount. Good character can only be developed in others by a leader whose own character is being developed. "The more honestly I name what is true about myself, the less I need to hide and defend and posture and pretend" (p. 152). Community is another essential element. "Every leader is a storyteller who narrates on behalf of the community the core reasons for its existence" (p. 155). This has to be done with honesty and discernment to create a transforming community. Finally, if we choose to be limping leaders we "can expect nothing more or less from ourselves and our leaders than to know Jesus better through their brokenness as well as our own. We must demand of ourselves and our leaders to limp and fall forward into the strong arms of grace" (p. 199).

Too Radical a Cure?

Leading with a Limp is a powerfully provocative book! A person cannot just read the book and comment that it had some helpful ideas. It is not just a list of principles, laws, or techniques that can be put to use in your average leadership paradigm. It also goes beyond recent discussions of the importance of self-disclosure and authenticity (Adubato & DiGeronimo, 2002; George, 2003; Maxwell, 2008; McIntosh & Rima, 1997; Quinn, 1996). It proposes a radical paradigm shift, or as Allender calls it, an *inversion.* What I appreciated was how accurately Allender exposed some very important and often undiscussed topics. What concerns me is whether many organizations could survive the inversion he proposes.

Few other leadership books address as frankly the topics found among Allender's five realities of leadership. "Betrayal in some form is as sure as the sun rising" (p. 31) is something most leaders know from their own experience. He goes on to say "it is like looking at the ten people who serve on a committee with you and wondering, *Who will take my words and soak them in kerosene and attempt to burn down my reputation?"* That is *frank.* This is the greatest strength of the book. The more painful part is addressing these leadership realities.

McIntosh and Rima (1997) discuss five broad categories of the "dark side" of leadership—some of which run parallel to Allender's (see their Narcissistic Leader, for example, p. 94). They call for more than just acknowledgement. "Unfortunately, overcoming the dark side is not quite as simple as merely acknowledging that we have a shadow side to

our personality. We must probe deeper to deal with the raw material that has gone into the making of our dark side" (p. 153).

Allender helps the reader "probe deeper" into the raw material by identifying the faulty responses and the character flaws that lead to them (p. 128). He also gives some hope with each one by suggesting a tipping point that may lead to the healthier response.

I appreciate Allender's frank discussions and explorations of the complexities and dynamics of real leadership challenges. What concerns me is whether his proposed "inversion" might be the proverbial cure that is deadlier than the disease. Many organizational cultures could not withstand the radical cure he recommends. A leader who announces that he is the "chief sinner" and that the terms his team and followers should think of him in are *"broken, foolish, reluctant, hungry, and disillusioned"* (p. 137) could be too much for some systems to bear. Although it might be good for the leader to face these things and address his attitudes and perspectives, many systems will not survive the stress. To Allender's credit, he does warn of some of the dangers. "If a leader publicly discloses his failure, he has to brace himself for trouble" (p. 171).

He further describes how a leader who admits personal failure "often loses respect, risks being marginalized, and could very well be dismissed—either literally by losing his job or in practice by being excluded from the inner circle of power" (p. 171). However, these warnings are primarily warnings for the leader himself or herself and do not adequately acknowledge the impact to the whole organizational system.

Literature in the area of family systems theory describes the impact to the family (or work) system of changes in the primary leader. These changes can be actual or even just perceptions among the family members. A critical illness in the primary leader, for example, or even a concern that the leader's life may be at risk, can shake the family system. In these situations "the family's capacity to come together in a salutary way depends primarily on the functioning of the family leader" (Friedman, 1985, p. 178). The potential impact on the system within which the leader functions needs to be more carefully considered before the radical inversions that Allender promotes are undertaken. Perhaps a more gradual, planned process could be undertaken without losing the values that Allender so rightly extols.

Leading with a Limp is a provocative book that is well worth the read. It puts boldly on the table leadership issues that must be addressed. It will challenge any leader, no matter how open and transparent they believe they have been in the past. Following Allender's counsel to leaders is fraught with huge risks. For the leader who courageously takes these risks there may be some incredible rewards. Many organizational systems, however, are probably not up to the shock to the system. Leaders will have to carefully assess their own environments and may need to find a little slower method to shift the organizational culture to one that doesn't just tolerate, but thrives on, leaders with the frankness, honesty and humility that Allender contends is vital to take full advantage of the most powerful weaknesses.

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