

*"No matter where you are in your leadership journey, this book will help you take the next step."*

Mark Batterson, NYT Bestselling Author of *The Circle Maker*

**INSANELY**

**PRACTICAL**

**LEADERSHIP**

**12 NO-NONSENSE KEYS  
TO MASTER THE ART  
OF LEADING YOURSELF  
AND OTHERS**

**LEADER**

**SHIP**

**STEPHEN  
BLANDINO**



PRAISE FOR  
***INSANELY PRACTICAL LEADERSHIP***

Leadership starts with self-leadership, and Stephen Blandino models this so well. If you don't consider yourself a natural leader, take heart. Stephen shows us how to become a "learned leader." No matter where you are in your leadership journey, this book will help you take the next step.

—Mark Batterson  
*NYT bestselling author of The Circle Maker*

All leaders will love my friend Stephen Blandino's book *Insanely Practical Leadership*. The book helps us understand the differences between a natural and a learned leader and how to appreciate, grow, and even leverage our leadership. The practicality of the book is refreshing, and you'll find yourself sharing the book and its insights with leaders you love.

—Sam Chand  
*Leadership consultant and author of VOICES*

*Insanely Practical Leadership* lives up to its name. Not only does Stephen Blandino provide you with an extraordinarily practical game plan to lead yourself and others, but he also equips you with a powerful tool to train your staff and develop your leaders.

—Scott Wilson  
*Founder of Ready Set Grow*  
*Author of Impact: Releasing the Power of Influence*

I wholeheartedly endorse *Insanely Practical Leadership* by Stephen Blandino. This book brilliantly combines a structured approach with clear targets, a well-defined roadmap, and built-in accountability, ensuring that every step in the process is both purposeful and Spirit-led. It's an incredibly practical and impactful guide that equips you with the tools for personal growth and for leading others effectively.

—Gerad Strong  
*Director of Leadership and Training*  
*Church Multiplication Network*

*Insanely Practical Leadership* by Stephen Blandino is one of the most refreshingly honest, authentic, and actionable leadership books I've ever read. Drawing from years of personal experience, successes and failures, and a wealth of the best research on leadership, Stephen offers a clear, concise, and comprehensive leadership tool to grow yourself and the people you lead. I will use this book for formational development of seasoned leaders and also for foundational discipleship for emerging leaders.

—Heather Zempel  
*Dream Collective Executive Director*  
*National Community Church*

Stephen Blandino's take on *Insanely Practical Leadership* is just what a leader needs to move from knowing leadership to actually doing leadership. With clear, actionable insights, Stephen provides a straightforward roadmap for mastering the art of leading yourself and others.

—Jeremy Yancey  
*Lead Pastor, Timber Creek Church*  
*Author of Good In Tension*

As someone who doesn't feel like a natural leader, *Insanely Practical Leadership* gave me handles to grow and become the person I dream of being. This book has two major strengths. First, it lives up to its name! The stories, questions, and tools make leadership within arm's reach for literally *anyone*! Second, Stephen is a very winsome writer. He is an expert on the topic but isn't afraid to show his scars. In some ways, the practices felt like he was sharing the steering wheel. You'll learn and want to do as you read. Let this book mentor you!

—Preston Ulmer  
*Director and Founder of The Doubters' Club*



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**AVAIL**





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# CONFESSIONS OF A FOLLOWER

I'm not a natural leader.

That's probably not a confession you expected to hear right out of the gate. But it's true. Growing up, I was never the popular kid in school. I wasn't the first one picked—or even in the top half—when my classmates chose teams on the playground. I made average grades, was never elected to student council, and nobody labeled me “Most likely to succeed.” I was a follower, not a leader.

My first attempt to lead happened when I started a Bible study at my high school. It was a train wreck. A few reluctant students came to the first meeting, but it didn't take long for the participation to dwindle. When I tried to restart the Bible study during my senior year, our sponsor teacher recommended we hold elections to choose the president of the club. She saw my leadership blind spots, but my insecurity got the best of me, and I snubbed her suggestion. The Bible club was *my* idea. Why on earth would we hold an election?

My leadership didn't get much better when I started working at a church. In many ways, it felt like an experiment in blunders and

stupidity. In my early years of ministry, I took a group of students to a summer youth camp. There was only one problem—I failed to reserve a trailer to haul the students’ luggage. We only had one empty seat in the church van, so I sheepishly announced, “Hey everyone, you may need to hold your luggage in your lap while we drive to camp.” The campground was three hours away. When we finally arrived, my attitude made it clear: *I don’t want to be here*. The camp director called me out on it, and rightly so.

My lack of leadership genius was evident in other ministry failings as well. Once, I tested a flash pot as a special effect for an upcoming outreach event. The flash pot was a small container that held pyrotechnic powder and was ignited by a tiny wire when you plugged it in. We tested it once, and the “explosion” was awesome. So, we decided to test it again, but this time with *more* powder. To my utter shock, I set a pew on fire—just twelve months after the auditorium had been remodeled. A giant hole, the size of my fist, burned through the seat cushion.

After our “rehearsal,” I began driving home, but I was so scared that I returned to the church to make sure nothing else was quietly smoldering under a pew. Then, I called my pastor to break the news. He was gracious in his response, but I can only imagine the dismay that went through his mind.

On another occasion, I reprimanded a group of students for behaving poorly during a meeting. I became so frustrated that I turned around and walked out of the room. Afterward, my wife was quick to tell me, “Thanks for leaving me in the room to clean up your mess.” And my pastor made it abundantly clear I could have handled that situation much better. Failure was a close

companion in my early days of ministry, and *nobody* hailed me as a natural-born leader.

Turns out, I'm not alone.

Extensive research reveals that only 10 percent of people possess the raw talent to manage.<sup>1</sup> And while there are clear differences between leading and managing, Gallup merges the two by defining a manager as “someone responsible for leading a team toward common objectives.”<sup>2</sup>

That's not me.

I'm not a *natural* leader.

Instead, I'm a *learned* leader.<sup>3</sup>

I learned everything I know about leadership by watching other leaders, reading countless books on leadership, attending leadership conferences, acquiring leadership coaching, pursuing a master's in organizational leadership, and—most importantly—*practicing leadership*.

I'm not a *natural* leader; nevertheless, I've become a *very effective* learned leader—which I later discovered has its advantages. I once heard John Maxwell—a great natural leader—say that learned leaders are very good at *teaching and coaching leadership*. Why? Because they had to figure it out for themselves. Through trial and error, coaching and training, and the ups and downs of leadership, they learned how to lead and, therefore, know how to teach leadership in a clear, systematic, and easy-to-understand way.

So, what is leadership?

Good leadership is the ability to positively influence people toward a shared vision while maximizing their gifts for the greater good. Over the years, I've not only learned a host of leadership skills to do just that—such as vision casting, building influence,

developing teams, and coaching others—but I’ve also discovered how to make leadership insanely practical. Whether it’s developing an easy-to-understand system or breaking leadership skills into a step-by-step process, I’ve learned how to put handles on leadership that anyone can use.

If you’re a *natural* leader, you’re about to discover an insanely practical tool to help you develop the leaders around you. You’ll find leadership principles and tactics put into words that come so naturally for you. And, of course, you’ll learn some helpful tips to refine your leadership genius.

If you’re a *learned* leader, you’ll find an insanely practical game plan to become a very effective leader. The content is filled with helpful tips, practical systems, powerful leadership examples, and great application ideas to help you put into practice everything you’re learning. You’ll elevate your leadership game, and, like natural leaders, you’ll hold a roadmap to develop others.

Every chapter is a “how to” chapter packed with insights and tools to equip you for success. If you prefer, you can read the entire book in the order it’s written. Or, if you’re experiencing an immediate pain point, feel free to jump to the chapter that’s most relevant at this moment. Either way, you’ll learn some insanely practical skills to maximize your leadership and invest in the people around you. Let’s get started.

PART 1

**MASTER THE  
ART OF LEADING  
YOURSELF**





## CHAPTER 1

# HOW TO GROW YOU

*“Growth for leaders is the treasure that funds the future journey.  
Stop finding the treasure along the way and the journey ends.”*

**—Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller**

“I don’t want you to hold anything back when you edit my book.” That’s what I said to the editor of my first book, *GO! Starting a Personal Growth Revolution*.<sup>4</sup> A mutual friend introduced me to Brannon, an editor with black-belt skills in the English language. He had worked with a successful author of best-selling titles, so I was beyond excited to meet him.

During our first conversation, Brannon gave me clear instructions: “Send me your strongest chapter and your weakest chapter. I’ll edit them, and then you can decide if you want to work with me.” Before we hung up the phone, I issued my confident challenge to Brannon to hold nothing back as he edited my book.

But his response was just as confident. Without flinching, Brannon said, “Oh, I won’t.”

And he didn’t.

I sent Brannon three chapters and then patiently awaited his glowing editorial commentary. A couple of weeks later, I received Brannon's reply and anxiously opened the file attached to his email.

My heart sank.

Every page—nearly every sentence—was shredded. He used Microsoft Word's "track changes" feature to make his corrections. There were so many comments in the margins that I had to double, triple, and sometimes quadruple-click to open the comment boxes and see the extent of the damage. Brannon bled all over my manuscript, and I was embarrassed.

At first, I thought, *Who does he think he is? Does he know how hard I've worked on this book? Does he have any idea how much blood, sweat, and tears I've shed over this manuscript?*

But editors don't edit to make you happy. They edit to make you better.

After reading his corrections and comments on each chapter, I had to make a decision: will I let my pride hold me back or let Brannon move me forward?

After careful consideration, I said to myself, *Stephen, you're writing a book about personal growth. If you can't handle the pain of a professional editor's wisdom and feedback—pain intended to help you grow—then you shouldn't be writing a book about personal growth.*

So, I reached out to Brannon and thanked him for his feedback. "I want you to edit the remainder of my book," I said. "But first, I want to rewrite each chapter based on the insights you shared with me from the first three chapters."

And that's what I did.

I rewrote *every* chapter based on what Brannon taught me.

My writing improved, and when I finished each chapter, I sent it to Brannon. But the pain that followed was no less severe. It didn't take long for Brannon's editorial genius to leave scraps of my manuscript on the cutting room floor. And not just a few scraps. The floor was covered like a battlefield strewn with dead bodies.

**Instead of lowering the manuscript to the level of my writing, Brannon pulled the latent potential out of me so my message could fly.**

I found myself divorcing sentences, paragraphs, and even big ideas I was once married to. Brannon didn't just word-smith each chapter. He murdered my manuscript. But when the agony ended, he helped me resurrect a message in a voice I didn't know I had. He pulled the potential out of me that I couldn't see in myself.

Every cut and every comment made me better. Every slice and slash, every revision and renovation, brought what seemed doomed back to life. Instead of lowering the manuscript to the level of my writing, Brannon pulled the latent potential out of me so my message could fly.

When I finished the book, I wrote in the acknowledgments, "Brannon: Thank you for your masterful work with words. You have been more than an editor to me. . . . You've been a mentor."

Brannon didn't just correct typos or tell me how to structure sentences better. He helped me find my voice. And every book since then has benefited from the wisdom I gleaned in that very first project.

I hate to think what would have happened if I ignored Brannon's advice. I'm confident of this—I would have never raised the lid on my growth as a writer.

## HOW TO GROW YOU

As a leader, you are responsible for *owning* your growth. You can't delegate it or negotiate it. You can't relegate it or vacate it. Growth is a permanent task in every job description at every level of the organization. If growth is ever checked off your to-do list, you'll be done with far more than you bargained for.

Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller once said, "Growth for leaders is the treasure that funds the future journey. Stop finding the treasure along the way and the journey ends."<sup>5</sup> Sadly, some leaders have stopped mining for the treasure. Others are looking for it haphazardly and half-heartedly. Still, others have bankrupted their future because they made personal growth optional.

As a leader, you have a dream burning in your gut. But between you and your dream is a gap—a growth gap. The only way to close that gap is to fund the journey toward your dream with the treasure of your growth. This happens when you get insanely practical about three keys: a growth mindset, a growth plan, and a growth team.

### 1) Adopt a Growth Mindset

When Karen and I got married, she had a two-year college degree and worked as an administrative assistant at a local hospital.

In the years that followed, she served in a variety of roles before finally applying to become a ticket agent for a major airline. The onboarding process for that job required six weeks of intensive training, but to Karen's surprise, she aced the training. However, that onboarding experience turned out to be far more than a job opportunity. It awakened a growth mindset in Karen and gave her the confidence to reenroll in college to complete a bachelor's degree.

On the first day of class, she was so nervous that she almost dropped out. She hadn't sat in a college classroom for more than a decade, and she wasn't sure she could cut it. But after that first class, she never looked back. Over the next three years, Karen worked hard to earn a history degree to become a teacher in the public school system.

On the day she graduated, her growth mindset didn't drift off to sleep. Quite the opposite. As she watched master's students cross the stage to receive their diplomas, she said to herself, *One day, that will be me.* And one day, it was. She taught for several years and then began the arduous journey of pursuing a master's in counseling. She worked all day and went to classes at night at TCU—all while being a mom and a pastor's wife. After four years, she graduated with her master's and then became a school counselor.

When you graduate school, a robust growth mindset won't let you graduate learning. In the years that followed her graduation, Karen's lifelong learning posture fueled a dream to become a licensed professional counselor. She completed some additional classes and then started the long process of certification. After completing three thousand hours of counseling, her dream finally came true.

Today, Karen has her own counseling practice, and she loves it. She reached her goal because she never checked a growth mindset

off her list. It's the driver in the seat of your potential. Since becoming an LPC, Karen has continued to acquire new counseling certifications, and every morning, I can hear her listening to podcasts, books, and interviews to sharpen her skills. That's the power of a growth mindset. As author Michael Hyatt observed, "Our beliefs about what's possible have a direct impact on the reality we experience."<sup>6</sup>

For our dreams to move from hopeful aspirations to vivid reality, we must adopt a growth mindset. Jesus provides us with a powerful example: "Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people" (Luke 2:52). Notice that Jesus's growth was intentional and continual. He didn't think about growing—He grew. And He wasn't haphazard about growing—He grew mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially.

**For a growth mindset to take root in your life, you must give an eviction notice to the limiting beliefs that are holding you back.**

That's the kind of growth mindset we need—one that's intentional and continual. Without it, we'll view growth as nothing more than a one-time event. Events, such as conferences and seminars, are great at *inspiring* change, but the change doesn't actually happen at the event. A process of growth must follow the event to produce sustainable, long-term habits of transformation. Simply put, events inspire change, processes create change, and habits sustain change.

This process is painful. As author and consultant Dr. Sam Chand observes, “You will grow only to the threshold of your pain.”<sup>7</sup> Growth is only found on the other side of pain if you have the right mindset. Your mindset will determine whether the pain becomes a cap or a catalyst for your growth.

For a growth mindset to take root in your life, you must give an eviction notice to the limiting beliefs that are holding you back. When you believe your life can change, you’ll start growing toward that change. Otherwise, who you are today will be all you’ll ever know. As author Erwin McManus observed, “Most limitations are illusions created by our inner fears, doubts, and insecurities. It requires a mind shift to see that the ceiling is not actually there.”<sup>8</sup> You must believe more is possible. You must recognize that the growth gap doesn’t have to be a permanent gap. It all starts with your mindset.

## 2) Create a Growth Plan

As a teenager, throughout college, and at the start of my career, I didn’t enjoy reading, which is kind of ironic for a person who writes books. Not until I was a couple of years into my leadership journey did I finally admit I was only hurting myself by neglecting a habit of reading. I’ve shared my journey in previous books, so I’ll keep it short.

One day, I picked up the first edition of John Maxwell’s book *Developing the Leader Within You*.<sup>9</sup> I devoured the book, and after reading it, I said, “I think this is the best leadership book I’ve ever read.”

That’s when it dawned on me.

“I think this is the *only* leadership book I’ve ever read.”

But that book became a launching pad for my personal growth. It awakened a growth mindset in me, and I began consuming more and more leadership content.

As my growth mindset took root, I attended a lunch gathering with three hundred leaders to hear John Maxwell teach from his book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*<sup>10</sup> (again, this was the original edition). That day, he taught “The Law of Process,” which says, “Leadership develops daily, not in a day.” Then, at the conclusion of the lunch, he challenged his audience to develop a plan for personal growth.

In response to Maxwell’s challenge, I bought his kit based on the twenty-one laws, which included a workbook and several cassette tapes. Yes, this was back in the ’90s. For my younger readers, I’m sure you can find these historical artifacts in a museum.

Each day I came into the office an hour early, listened to a tape, and took notes in the workbook. That kit became my very first growth plan and helped me close some of my leadership growth gaps.

Since buying that kit many years ago, I’ve developed a growth planning model that I call a *Growth TRAC*. A Growth TRAC is a specific, measurable, and accountable plan for personal and professional growth.<sup>11</sup> It’s a customizable growth planning process that helps you fill your treasure chest so you can fund your dreams with your growth. The TRAC growth planning model helps you answer four growth questions.

## **TARGET: WHAT ARE MY GROWTH GOALS?**

A Growth TRAC first identifies the *Target* you hope to reach. The target pinpoints a specific growth area—spiritual, relational,



emotional, mental, financial, vocational, or organizational. This process doesn't require any mental gymnastics because most people have an intuitive sense of where they want to grow and how they want to improve.

Once you identify your growth area, turn it into a target by stating it as a clear goal. For example, your target might be, "Improve my emotional intelligence by 10 percent by September 15" or "Develop my strategic planning skills so I can facilitate a strategic planning retreat with my team by May 20." Each target is clear, specific, measurable, and time-bound.

## **ROADMAP: HOW DO I PLAN TO GROW?**

My wife will tell you I'm directionally challenged. I've been known to turn the wrong way down one-way streets. I'll take wrong exits, turn left when I should turn right, and take shortcuts that turn out to be dead ends. If that's not bad enough, I recently got lost in a parking garage.

To avoid making the same mistake with your personal growth, you need a *Roadmap* to get you to your *target*. Your roadmap will include a series of growth steps, such as training, resources, coaching, and experiences. For example, your roadmap to develop your strategic planning skills might include attending a strategic planning seminar (training), reading a book about strategic planning (resource), meeting with a strategic planning consultant (coaching), and organizing a strategic planning retreat (experience). Each step is part of your roadmap to help you reach your ultimate target.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY: WHO WILL HOLD ME ACCOUNTABLE FOR MY GROWTH?**

*Accountability* is uncomfortable, which is why it's easy to overlook. You're responsible for your own growth, but accountability helps you leverage the support of friends and mentors. The keys to successful accountability are *focus* and *frequency*.

*Focus* provides your accountability partner with specific questions focused on your growth. For example, have a friend ask you, "What strategic planning skills have you learned in the last two weeks?" or "How much of your strategic planning book have you read, and what are your three biggest takeaways so far?"

*Frequency* is how often you meet with your accountability partner—perhaps weekly, monthly, or quarterly. Be consistent. As author Jim Collins observed, "The signature of mediocrity is chronic inconsistency."<sup>12</sup> To keep your Growth TRAC out of the gutter of mediocrity, meet with an accountability partner regularly to help take the growth steps in your roadmap.

## **CHECK-UP: WHEN AND HOW WILL I EVALUATE MY GROWTH PROGRESS?**

The final part of the Growth TRAC is *Check-Ups*. Check-ups help you evaluate and monitor progress, and then make necessary adjustments. To maximize check-ups, you'll want to take four steps. First, attach deadlines to each step in your roadmap. This will help you complete each step on time. Second, conduct your check-ups in a systematic way (monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually), depending on what makes the most sense for your goal.

Third, make mid-course corrections. It's okay to change your Growth TRAC as you discover what's working and what's not.

Fourth, enlist the help of your accountability partner. Include them in the check-up or provide an update to them with your overall progress and any mid-course corrections.

A Growth TRAC will help you create an intentional plan for personal and professional growth. You can also use this process with your team. (For a sample Growth TRAC, see Leadership Tool #1 at the end of this chapter.)

### 3) Assemble a Growth Team

My friend Scott Wilson introduced me to the idea of a growth team. I've always valued mentors and coaches, but Scott expanded my thinking to form a more robust team that helps me grow in the most important areas of my life. Consider developing a growth team that looks something like this:



At the center of your growth team, write, “God and me.” A relationship with God profoundly shapes who we become and how we grow. God shouldn’t be an addition to our lives. Instead, He should sit at the core of our lives. Then, surrounding your relationship with God, assemble a growth team to help you become healthy in a variety of areas.

For example, your spouse or a close family member might help you grow in the most important relationships in your life. Prayer partners can help you grow spiritually. A counselor can help you grow emotionally while a host of coaches, mentors, and consultants can elevate your growth at work. Financial advisors provide wisdom on stewarding money and saving for the future. Wise friends help us grow wise, and physical growth is made possible with the help of doctors and workout partners. Each of these people can be part of your growth team.

Where do you start? Begin by identifying the primary roles and responsibilities in your life. Then, identify individuals to help you grow in those specific areas. Invite them to join your growth team, and then determine when and how often you’d like to meet. Keep in mind that some of your team members may require a financial investment, such as counselors, coaches, and consultants.

To create your own growth team, begin by identifying the primary roles and responsibilities in your life. Then, identify individuals to help you grow in those specific areas. Invite them to join your growth team, and then determine when and how often you’d like to meet.

Finally, determine what you need from your growth team. When you meet with them, come prepared with questions, take

notes, and then apply what you're learning. Be sure to honor their time and effort.

The members of your growth team will look different based on the roles and responsibilities in your life. Furthermore, some growth team members will change as the needs and seasons of your life change. To help you develop your own growth team, see Leadership Tool #1: Growth TRAC and Growth Team.

These are the keys to insanely practical growth. You must adopt a growth mindset, create a growth plan, and then assemble a growth team. All three will change and mature over time, but they are the core ingredients to develop your potential and maximize your personal and professional growth.

## **INSANELY PRACTICAL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. Why is personal growth essential in the life of a leader, and what excuses do we often give for failing to prioritize our growth?
2. What does it look like to have an intentional and continual growth mindset?
3. In what area of your life do you want to create a growth plan, and what steps could you include in your roadmap to grow?
4. If you were to assemble a growth team, who are two people who could help you grow the most?

## LEADERSHIP TOOL #1

### Growth TRAC and Growth Team

Review the sample Growth TRAC below. Then, create your own Growth TRAC in the template. Choose your Target (goal), create a Roadmap (training, resources, coaching, and experiences), identify someone to hold you Accountable, and establish a Check-Up process.

	GROWTH QUESTION	GROWTH TRAC
<b>T</b>	<p><b>TARGET</b></p> <p>What is my growth goal?</p>	Create and cast a compelling vision for my department by May 15.
<b>R</b>	<p><b>ROADMAP</b></p> <p>What is my growth plan?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read <i>The Vision Driven Leader</i> by Michael Hyatt.</li> <li>• Create the first draft of a vision.</li> <li>• Share the vision with three leaders and make adjustments on two rounds of input.</li> <li>• Create a vision-casting script and secure feedback from my leadership coach.</li> <li>• Cast vision to my department.</li> </ul>
<b>A</b>	<p><b>ACCOUNTABILITY</b></p> <p>Who will hold me accountable for my growth?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability Partner: Alan Colson</li> <li>• Accountability Question: What progress have you made on each step to clarify and cast vision to your department?</li> </ul>
<b>C</b>	<p><b>CHECK-UP</b></p> <p>When and how will I evaluate my growth progress?</p>	<p>Evaluate progress as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read book by January 20</li> <li>• Create vision draft by February 5</li> <li>• Secure leadership team input by March 5</li> <li>• Vision script and coaching by April 15</li> <li>• Cast vision May 15</li> </ul>

<b>GROWTH QUESTION</b>		<b>GROWTH TRAC</b>
<b>T</b>	<b>TARGET</b> What is my growth goal?	
<b>R</b>	<b>ROADMAP</b> What is my growth plan?	
<b>A</b>	<b>ACCOUNTABILITY</b> Who will hold me accountable for my growth?	
<b>C</b>	<b>CHECK-UP</b> When and how will I evaluate my growth progress?	

Use the chart below to assemble your Growth Team. Identify your current roles, a growth team member, how often you'll meet, and the area where you need their help to grow.

<b>GROWTH TEAM</b>			
<b>MY ROLES</b>	<b>GROWTH TEAM MEMBER</b>	<b>FREQUENCY OF MEETING</b>	<b>CURRENT GROWTH NEED</b>

Download the Growth TRAC and Growth Team templates at [insanelypracticalleadership.com](http://insanelypracticalleadership.com).





## CHAPTER 2

# HOW TO BE A SPIRITUALLY GROUNDED LEADER

*“When a leader has a lifelong developmental perspective,  
that leader expects God to shape him over a lifetime.  
The leader views the things that happen to him as  
God’s sovereign way of developing him.”*

**—Dr. J. Robert Clinton**

**T**he year was 1984. Apple unveiled its Macintosh personal computer during a Super Bowl ad, Tina Turner’s song, “What’s Love Got to Do with It,” topped the charts, and the Supreme Court ruled (5-4) that the private use of a home VCR to tape TV programs for later viewing did not violate federal copyright laws.<sup>13</sup> How times have changed.

But for me, 1984 was the year my curiosity about Jesus was fully awakened. I was in ninth grade, and one night after a youth service, I went home, climbed into bed, and then whispered a prayer as I stared at the ceiling: “Jesus, please forgive me of my sin and be the Lord of my life.”

There was nothing emotional about that moment. I didn't cry, revel in God's grace, or run victory laps around my bedroom. Nevertheless, that moment marked me. In the days that followed, my appetite to know God grew stronger. Then, at the start of my tenth-grade year, I joined a discipleship class that bolstered my spiritual growth.

Each week, a handful of students met around a couple of eight-foot tables. There weren't any cool games or fun competitions, and the classroom with cinder block walls screamed "boring." In our very first meeting, our youth pastor gave each of us a three-ring binder with lined notebook paper inside it. He said, "This is your quiet time notebook." *Quiet time* was code for "Spend time with God," and our binder was the tool to help us pray and study the Bible.

Looking at a group of wide-eyed students, he continued: "Each day, take a few minutes to read a passage of scripture until you get to a verse that really speaks to you. Then, write down the passage, the key verse, and look up other scripture references that reinforce it."

*Simple enough, I thought. I can do this.*

"Then, write down the main truths you learned from the passage," he said, "along with how you'll apply them to your life." That was our roadmap to study the Bible. With those simple instructions, we started with the gospel of John.

I still have that old, vinyl three-ring binder. My very first entry was on Thursday, September 6, 1984. And in the months that followed, I studied four books of the Bible: John, Galatians, Matthew, and Ephesians.

That class changed my life.

That practice ignited within me a love for God's Word.  
That habit spiritually grounded me.  
But my spiritual training didn't end there.

## **EARLY MORNINGS**

A couple of years later, our pastor began opening the church's sanctuary on weekday mornings at 6:00 a.m. for prayer. This wasn't a corporate prayer gathering with dozens of congregants but a place for people to privately pray at the start of each day. Some people knelt in prayer while others sat quietly in a pew. Some lay on the floor calling out to God while others would pace and pray throughout the dimly lit auditorium.

**Looking back, I now realize prayer is more caught than taught, and I was beginning to catch their habit of prayer.**

A couple of times each week, a friend stopped by my house to pick me up for early morning prayer. As I sat in the quietness of the sanctuary, I could hear various pastors praying. I heard their cries, their burdens, their hunger to know God. I heard them pour out their hearts as they asked God to pour out His Spirit. Those prayers were expressed with a beautiful blend of love for God and compassion for people.

In the weeks that followed, I found myself mimicking these prayers. I wasn't trying to copy them, but I had never learned how to pray. Their practice of prayer became a model for me to follow. Looking back, I now realize prayer is more *caught* than *taught*, and I was beginning to catch their habit of prayer.

Those two encounters changed the trajectory of my life. Learning how to study the Bible as a pimple-nosed teenager and developing my own habit of prayer spiritually grounded me. While I didn't know it at the time, those habits also became the foundation of my leadership.

Today, I start most mornings studying my Bible and spending time in prayer. I walk into the kitchen, make a cup of coffee, and then sit down at the kitchen table with my Bible and journal. After reading my Bible, I open my journal, jot down three things I'm grateful for, and then write my reflections on the passage of scripture I just read. It's a peaceful and powerful way to start my morning. And one day, I'll give those journals to my grandsons.

Next, I spend some time in prayer. Sometimes, I sit, sometimes, I kneel, and sometimes, I pace and pray, walking circles around our living room. Sometimes, I'll read a "daily declaration" to renew my mind in God's Word. And sometimes, I'll simply worship.

Regular prayer and consistent Bible study—not to prepare a sermon but to simply know Jesus more deeply—are the sustaining sources of a lifetime of leadership. Nothing else can replace them.

## HOW TO BE A SPIRITUALLY GROUNDED LEADER

Leadership is immensely challenging. Just this week, I talked to a pastor with a bold vision to plant a new church, a minister lamenting the heart-breaking pain of a board member gone rogue, a missionary navigating transition as a veteran leader passes the baton, and a church planter experiencing extreme spiritual warfare in an urban context. Every situation comes with its share of stress and struggle.

As the external pressures of leadership increase, we need a more powerful presence within us. My strength isn't enough. Neither is yours. That's why the apostle Paul said, "I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit" (Ephesians 3:16). Without the unlimited resources of the Holy Spirit, we'll navigate the landmines of leadership in the limitations of our own strength. Eventually, we'll burn out, blow up, or wither in exasperation. To tap those unlimited resources and become a spiritually grounded leader, we need four spiritual keys.

### 1) Spiritual Priority

Author Greg McKeown made an interesting observation about the word *priority*. McKeown notes that when the word *priority* came into the English language in the 1400s, it was originally a singular word that meant "the prior or very first thing." It remained a singular word for the next five hundred years, until the 1900s when we made the term plural: *priorities*. McKeown poses a powerful question: can there be *multiple* very first things?<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, many people are convinced the answer to McKee's question is a decisive "Yes"—even in their spiritual lives. But you can't swear your allegiance to multiple first gods. There is only one God, and Jesus makes it painstakingly clear what priority He must have in our lives: "But *seek first* his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33, NIV, emphasis added).

**Jesus must not only be first; He must also be the center.**

Prior to this verse, Jesus addresses the wants and worries our hearts long for. But rather than being dominated by our *want for things* and the *worries of life*, Jesus calls us to seek first His kingdom and righteousness. To seek His kingdom means to seek His kingship in and over our lives. And to seek His righteousness is to seek a life conformed to the righteousness of Christ. When we do this, He promises to take care of our wants and worries (Matthew 6:33).

This is the starting place to become a spiritually grounded leader. Seeking God must be our *very first thing*. But let me take it one step further: Jesus must not only be first; He must also be the *center*.

We love lists, and if you follow a time-management system, you probably have a robust list of tasks to do, people to see, and

projects to finish. One by one, we complete our tasks and then proudly put a check by each one.

Take the kids to school. *Check.*

Complete the project at work. *Check.*

Lead the staff meeting. *Check.*

Pick up the laundry. *Check.*

Wrap the birthday present. *Check.*

Mow the lawn. *Check.*

Make dinner. *Check.*

Each check gives us permission to move on to something else that requires our attention. But let me be clear: putting Jesus first doesn't reduce Him to the first task on our to-do list. Tasks get checked off the list. Jesus doesn't. Instead, He influences everything on the list.

Simply put, Jesus must be the *center* of our lives.

When Jesus is the center, He influences every other part of our lives. He influences our work, family, relationships, hobbies, time, talent, and treasure. We seek Him *first*, and He sits at the *center* of our lives, influencing everything else.

What about you? Do you seek Jesus first? Does He sit at the center of your life with permission to freely influence the rest of your life? Becoming spiritually grounded begins when our lives are grounded in Jesus. It's making Him your Priority—your very first thing.

## 2) Spiritual Practices

Years ago, news anchor Dan Rather interviewed Mother Teresa. In the interview, he asked, "When you pray, what do you

say to God?” Mother Teresa’s response was unexpected: “I don’t say anything. I listen.”

Curious to know more, Dan Rather asked, “Well, okay . . . when God speaks to you, then, what does He say?”

Mother Teresa replied, “He doesn’t say anything. He listens.”

The news anchor was puzzled. Then, she added, “And if you don’t understand that, I can’t explain it to you.”<sup>15</sup>

Mother Teresa’s words sound perplexing, but in the most beautiful way, she’s describing friendship with God. Sometimes, friends just quietly sit with each other. Their presence is enough.

Spiritual practices bring us into the presence of Jesus. Author Richard Foster described it powerfully:

*We do indeed engage in practices—disciplines, if you will—but remember, these practices earn us nothing in the economy of God. Nothing. Their only purpose is to place us before God. That is all. . . . God then steps into our actions and, over time and experience, produces in us the formation of heart and mind and soul for which we long.*<sup>16</sup>

Notice that spiritual practices don’t change us—God does. The practices are merely the way we place ourselves before God so He can do His work of transformation inside our hearts.

Spiritual practices take various shapes and sizes. Prayer, Bible study, worship, fasting, serving, generosity, and community are just a few of those practices that bring us before God to be transformed by His presence. When those practices are employed deliberately and consistently, the transformation is deep and wide. Not only are we changed, but those around us are changed as well.



My grandmother—Violet Morley—understood the power of spiritual practices, particularly the practice of prayer. She lived in Lakenheath, England, but her prayer life wasn't contained to the limits of this tiny village. One day, I felt prompted to call and ask her about the lessons she had learned from a lifetime of prayer. That day, she said something I'll never forget: "We have to do many different things, but *prayer* is the main thing."

There it is again—the very first thing.

Prayer was her priority.

Grandma lived to be ninety-two years old, and although she was small in stature, her prayer life was enormous in impact. In fact, at her funeral, stories were told and letters were read by the people Grandma quite literally "prayed into the Kingdom." Her impact was so deep that on three separate occasions, people stood in applause. I've been to a lot of funerals, but I've never seen the person in the casket receive a standing ovation. Grandma's life was like a ripple, and prayer was the engine that produced each ripple.

That's the beauty of a life devoted to prayer, God's Word, and the practices that foster spiritual maturity.

What about you? What are you doing to cultivate spiritual practices that draw you close to Jesus, fuel your spirit, settle your mind, and empower your leadership? Maybe it's time to deliberately and consistently increase your engagement in spiritual practices.

### **3) Spiritual Pace**

I've always valued time with God, but over the past few years, the Lord has been teaching me the power and importance of

*unrushed* time with God. This might sound like a trivial discrepancy, but in a culture consumed with getting more done in less time, I believe it's the difference-maker—especially for leaders with heavy demands.

Jesus was one such leader.

After performing a miracle where He fed five thousand people, Jesus insisted His disciples get into a boat and cross the lake. Then, after sending the crowds home, “He went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone” (Matthew 14:23). But the disciples didn't immediately follow Jesus's instructions. Instead, “That evening Jesus' disciples went down to the shore *to wait for him*. But as darkness fell and *Jesus still hadn't come back*, they got into the boat and headed across the lake toward Capernaum” (John 6:16-17, emphasis added).

**If we're not careful, we'll begin  
measuring intimacy with God  
by our efficiency with God.**

Those passages sound simple enough, but when I read them, I'm convicted with this thought: *Has anyone ever had to wait on me to finish praying?* Jesus modeled *the unrushed way* by not rushing His time with the Father. Despite the demands Jesus faced, His leadership pace didn't exceed His spiritual pace.

I know; *unrushed* time with God sounds irrational and impossible, especially when speed is the name of the game for so many leaders. But if we're not careful, we'll begin measuring intimacy with God by our efficiency with God. Efficiency sounds like a good leadership tactic, but intimacy is the fuel to help you finish well.

Authors Ryan Scoog, Peter Greer, and Cameron Doolittle rightly note the importance of pace to fight the intoxicating nature of leadership influence: "One of the easiest ways to fight the temptation to value influence above God is to lead at the *pace of prayer*. We may be worshiping the idol of influence rather than Jesus if we and those we lead are too busy serving Jesus to have a dynamic prayer life."<sup>17</sup>

When we combine spiritual practices with a healthy spiritual pace, the transformation is deep. You can't microwave maturity. It requires a spiritual pace that makes room for our soul to breathe and the Spirit to work.

#### **4) Spiritual Perspective**

In the year 2000, after spending eleven years in local church youth ministry, a friend and I teamed up to launch an organization to train young leaders. Each year, we conducted dozens of events around the United States to train thousands of leaders. We created leadership curriculum, conducted an innovative leadership experience in Europe, and even trained students in places like Germany and Japan.

Starting this ministry required a big step of faith. In addition to building something from the ground up, most of our staff had to raise their own financial support—much like a missionary. For

the first eighteen months, Karen and I lived with my in-laws just to make ends meet, and there were multiple times when we had to pick and choose which bill to pay first. We loved our mission, but in the end, the organization didn't survive.

When you work extremely hard to bring a dream to life, and then you watch it die a slow death, your mind is ravaged with questions—many of which go unanswered. To make matters worse, other people ask you questions too. “Why didn't the ministry make it?” “How come it no longer exists?” “What was the point of all that?”

But as I look back on the four years that I served the organization, I now see through a different set of lenses. In many ways—and my coworkers would agree—God did His greatest work *in* us during that time. How so? For me personally, it was during that season:

- I learned to trust God in a deeper measure.
- I discovered my purpose in life and was able to articulate it in a life-mission statement.
- I learned the power of personal growth planning.
- I came to understand how God shapes and forms leaders.
- My knowledge of leadership skyrocketed.
- My philosophy of leadership was significantly shaped by Scripture.

I'm the leader I am today in large part because of that difficult season. In fact, I've written two books since then that would not exist today had I not gone through that journey. Furthermore, the vision of the church I pastor today was highly influenced by what I learned during those four pivotal years.

On the outside, most people would call it a failure. If I wanted to, I could certainly choose to interpret it that way too. Instead, I choose to see it with a lifelong developmental perspective. Leadership expert Dr. J. Robert Clinton describes it like this:

*When a leader has a lifelong developmental perspective, that leader expects God to shape him over a lifetime. The leader views the things that happen to him as God's sovereign way of developing him. That leader recognizes that all of life, while being vital and true for the moment, is also used to prepare him for all of the rest of life.<sup>18</sup>*

Please stop and reread Dr. Clinton's words.

Now, do it again.

Spiritually grounded leaders “expect” God’s shaping activity throughout their lives. Leaders committed to spiritual maturity view hardships, tests, and trials as “God’s sovereign way of developing” them. Leaders with spiritual perspective realize that “all of life” will “prepare [them] for all of the rest of life.” This is why spiritual perspective is so crucial to your leadership. Without it, not only will you see hardship incorrectly, but you’ll squander the work of God inside you.

To lead for a lifetime, you need a lifetime developmental perspective. You need to see pain, tests, and trials as the tools God uses to form you, grow you, and stretch you as a leader. I’m not suggesting God is the originator of all these hardships, but God doesn’t waste them either. The question is, will you?

Joseph is a perfect case study of spiritual perspective. He was sold by his brothers into slavery, falsely accused of attempted rape, and thrown in prison for years. After thirteen years of rejection,

accusation, and imprisonment, Joseph was miraculously promoted to second-in-command of Egypt.

When a devastating famine struck the land, Joseph's brothers came searching for food. When they knelt before Joseph, pleading for food and the opportunity to return safely home, Joseph didn't take revenge on his brothers. Instead, his spiritual perspective won the day: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people" (Genesis 50:20).

This is the kind of perspective you need when the clouds of pain and suffering come rolling in. This is the outlook you must take when you're betrayed, rejected, and falsely accused. But it can only happen if you adopt a spiritual perspective—one that believes "God intended it all for good."

Without a healthy spiritual perspective, you risk becoming angry, bitter, and resentful at the very pain God wants to redeem to shape you into a Christ-centered leader. Without spiritual perspective, your heart will grow cold, and you'll become resistant to the voice of His Spirit.

Is it hard? Certainly! But as the apostle Paul once said, "Easy street is a dead-end street" (Philippians 3:17-19, MSG). Don't undermine God's work inside you just because your leadership circumstances are unenjoyable, undesirable, and unbearable. A more spiritually grounded version of you—deeply in love with Jesus—awaits on the other side of the pain if you'll view it with the right perspective.

Dr. J. Robert Clinton further emphasized the importance of perspective when he said, "The difference between leaders and followers is perspective. The difference between leaders and

effective leaders is better perspective.”<sup>19</sup> A *spiritual* perspective gives you the *better* perspective. It helps you frame hardship correctly and respond to life wisely.

Priority makes your spiritual growth important. Practices make your spiritual growth evident. Pace makes your spiritual growth vibrant. Perspective makes your spiritual growth resilient. This is the pathway to becoming a spiritually grounded leader. Together, these ingredients will deepen your trust in God and form you into a spiritually mature leader. To put these keys into practice, begin with Leadership Tool #2: The Spiritual Maturity Map.

## INSANELY PRACTICAL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What or whom has God used to inspire or accelerate your spiritual journey?
2. Which spiritual practice has most profoundly shaped your spiritual growth, and which practice would you like to grow in?
3. What would it look like for you to cultivate “unrushed time with God”?
4. How does a spiritual perspective help you process hardship, navigate pain, and keep your heart tender before God?

## LEADERSHIP TOOL #2

### The Spiritual Maturity Map

Use the Spiritual Maturity Map below to assess the four keys to becoming a spiritually grounded leader and to develop a plan to foster deeper spiritual maturity.

SPIRITUAL MATURITY MAP									
<b>SPIRITUAL PRIORITY:</b> On a scale from 1 to 10, how much of a priority is your spiritual growth right now?									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>SPIRITUAL PRACTICES:</b> Pick two spiritual practices you'd like to give concentrated focus to over the next thirty days. Articulate below when and how you will do this.									
Prayer			Community			Evangelism			
Bible Study			Serving			Fasting			
Worship			Generosity			Solitude			
How will you cultivate these spiritual practices?									
<b>SPIRITUAL PACE:</b> What are some practical steps you can take to slow your pace to create unrushed time with God?									
<b>SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE:</b> Which of the statements below best describes how you typically view tests, trials, and hardships in your life?									
	I view tests, trials, and hardships as I'm doing something wrong.								
	I view tests, trials, and hardships as an attack from the devil.								
	I view tests, trials, and hardships as God's disappointment in me.								
	I view tests, trials, and hardships as just a part of normal life.								
	I view tests, trials, and hardships as part of God's life-shaping process.								
What changes do you need to make in your perspective on tests, trials, and hardships, and how can you develop greater cooperation with God's life-shaping process?									

Download the Spiritual Maturity Map at  
[insanelypracticalleadership.com](http://insanelypracticalleadership.com).