The Softer Side of Leadership

- Discussion Guide -

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to accompany

The Softer Side of Leadership: Essential Soft Skills That Transform Leaders and the People They Lead by Eugene B. Habecker

Note from Dr. Habecker

Dr. Sherilyn Emberton, president of Huntington University, has compiled this helpful study guide to facilitate further discussion about the ideas set forth in *The Softer Side of Leadership*. Her insights and questions are based on her experiences in using the book for group discussion. I am grateful for her work.

Eugene Habecker

Introduction

Questions

1. In crisis situations, leaders often must face challenges with excellence in three areas: "absorb chaos, give calm, and provide hope."

Which of these three gives you the most concern in light of your leadership experience?

How have you observed leadership failure in any of these three areas?

What are some contemporary leadership scenarios that have demonstrated strength in all three?

2. If you were to ask people in your leadership circle to describe your leadership skills, would they say you were more likely to excel in your "soft" or "hard" skills? Would you agree with their assessment?

Group Think Activity: Working with the idea of embedding "soft skills" within the fabric of your institution or organization, what are three top priorities for implementation? What group or individual could best begin this process? What resources and cooperation would they need?

Chapter One

Protect Sacred Space and Enable Deep Thinking

Questions

1. In understanding the concept of "sacred space," do people often expect congruency in public and private leadership demonstrations? What difficulties can those you lead experience when the gap is too wide?

2. How important is *soul care* considered in your work environment? Describe some ways in which you have seen it done well.

Personal Reflection Activity: Scripture instructs us to keep the Sabbath as a gift of God to us. Can the practice of the Sabbath be applied to work? Are there times in your workday or workweek where the practice of rest and sacred reflection could be used to develop "soft skills"? What role does Sabbath play in your life?

Chapter Two

Build a Foundation for Leadership

Questions

1. The foundational "big rocks" of leadership remain pretty consistent across organizations and institutions. Is there a "big rock" that seems to be less stable in your organizational DNA? What would you need to be willing to do to restore its stability?

2. If we think of metrics and performance results as biblical tools for formation, can that change the way in which we value them? What is an example of a data point that your organization values which could be used to promote a formative change?

3. Consider what Jesus said to his disciples about the widow and her mites. Is there something in your leadership journey that has clearly been an *all-in* sacrifice? Would you do it again?

Chapter Three

Welcome Self-Discover Learning

Questions

1. Dr. Habecker writes, "What is learned after the leadership role is accepted will likely matter much more than what was learned prior to it." It is important to be on a continual path of self-discovery. What types of assessment have you done to understand how you lead? Verbalize your efforts to be self-aware during your work of leading others.

2. How does your current schedule help you maintain a healthy work-life-spirit balance? Are there people or events in your life that contribute to an imbalance? If you could make one change in your regular leadership pattern or routine, what would that be?

Conceptual Exploration: SABBATICAL. Many organizations and institutions offer a sabbatical experience for various levels of leadership. The success of this type of *Sabbath* or *respite* usually hinges on proper preparation. What steps would you need to take in your life to be ready to step away for renewal? How can you create a renewal experience for those you lead?

Chapter Four

Stay Connected to the Heart

Questions

1. If authentic leadership comes from a right heart, what should we expect as the evidence? If disingenuous leadership can be reversed by a renewed pursuit of God's heart, can a position of leadership be restored? What might that look like?

2. In your leadership opportunity, how have you been blessed by heart-filled leadership? How did this leadership approach empower you?

Group Think Activity: Sometimes, an organization or institution needs to get in touch with its heart or mission. As a member of the organization or institution, and a leader, how can you help launch this effort? Should it be an inside-out or outside-in process? What Scripture might be used as a focus?

Chapter Five

Practice Consistent Fitness Renewal

Questions

1. How can we begin to separate our work from what we've truly "been given (by God) to do"? Who can help us in this process? What resources do we need?

2. As leaders, what responsibility do we have to model the prioritization of selfcare? What are some successful strategies you use to model wellness?

Personal Reflection Activity: Where do you struggle in your journey to be the healthiest you? What can you do differently to address that obstacle? How can the pursuit of *joy* play a role?

Chapter Six

Cultivate Creativity

Questions

1. Leadership as creativity can be viewed as helping people activate their thinking. Can you think of a time that a special act of creativity made an initiative or project successful? Have you ever not contributed an idea you had and later had someone else move that same idea forward to action?

2. How can leaders contribute to a creative culture while also maintaining realistic boundaries?

Conceptual Exploration: IDEATION. Leaders do not have to be the conceptual architects behind every successful project. However, leading others implies that you can foster an environment where the best ideas are brought forward. How comfortable are you in leading a think tank scenario? What can the leader contribute to an already great idea?

Chapter Seven

Enhance Trust

Questions:

1. The notion of *mutual trust* can be aligned with our personal relationship with Christ. We know that He desires a familial fellowship with us and we should desire that with Him. How do we demonstrate trust, as leaders, when we are not quite sure it is mutual? How might we casually test the waters of trust?

2. How have you seen leaders inspire trust? How can we overcome past trust issues while also demonstrating transparency in leadership?

3. What are some ways we can prepare ourselves as leaders to face issues of trust (mistrust)? What roles can other organizational leaders play in helping you initiate conversation on trust?

Chapter Eight

Ensure Personal and Organizational Accountability

Questions:

1. Personal accountability and organizational accountability are not easily separated. As the leader, you will often be asked to be the face of the organization or institution that you represent. How does your personal integrity align with your organization's integrity? Is it possible to maintain personal accountability even if your organization does not?

2. What motivates you as a leader? Does your passion for leading reflect a disciplining approach? Should it?

Group Think Activity: Accountability groups are often popular in church ministry. Has your organization or institution fostered accountability groups for leaders? Could this practice provide a framework for developing leaders?

Chapter Nine

Embrace the Power of Forgiveness

Questions:

1. Digging deeper into the belief that "forgiveness nurtures leadership," how can we prepare to proactively embrace a practice of forgiveness?

2. Of the four phases of the cycle of forgiveness (*confrontation, redemptive forgiveness, restoration, and restitution*), which is the most difficult for you to model?

3. Describe a time when you extended forgiveness as a leader, but it did not produce a change in behavior. What did you learn from that experience?

Chapter Ten

Follow and Lead, Lead and Follow

Questions:

1. Had you ever considered that through your unselfish act of following, you can bless your leader(s) with purpose? With that end in mind, is there a situation in which your history of following did not bless your leader? What would you do differently today?

2. What has been the role of soliciting and incorporating feedback into your leadership purpose? Can you detail a modification or change in leadership practice that you have made to build your leadership skill?

Conceptual Exploration: EFFICACY. Submitting to feedback should not be an exercise in futility or perceived to be an act of criticism. Instead, the process should produce fruit—better leadership. How can leaders set the stage for quality feedback? How can leaders demonstrate a good-faith effort to incorporate feedback from followers?

Chapter Eleven

Understand That the Greatest Soft Skill Is Love

Questions:

1. How has your organization or institution demonstrated *love* toward you during your leadership development?

2. Understanding the *messiness* (frailty) of the institutions and organizations that we lead allows us to model the restorative work of leading. Can you share a situation in which the transparency of a *messy* event or situation allowed you to share love for a fallen world?

3. Have you worked in an environment that promoted a culture of loving the leader? How did the leader(s) respond?

Conclusion

Reflection: As you prepare to continue your call to lead, what are the "soft skills of leadership" that you desire to incorporate into your current role? How will this also prepare you to face the challenge of doing the work you have been given?