

LIVING IN THE PARADOXES

THE SECOND CHAIR is a complex and challenging role to fill, but you probably already know that. You understand the tension of leadership and the high-stakes game that goes along with it. Since you have picked up this book, you know that serving in the second chair involves seasons of frustration and stress as you try to follow your senior leader. Because of your position and your natural temperament, you cannot be passive about the future of your church or organization. At the same time, your position seems to limit your ability to change things for the better. This book is written for you, if you are looking for hope and direction as you live with this sense of urgency and passion.

This is not just another leadership book. At times, we have felt great exhilaration in discovering resources that helped shape our vision of a preferred future or offered a solution to a burdensome problem. We have been frequent consumers of books, tapes, and conferences as a means of improving our leadership. Yet we have often felt frustration or discouragement after using these resources because they were not aimed at us. Their focus was the senior leader of the organization, the person who has the freedom and relative autonomy that comes with this top position. In the second chair, the amount of change you can initiate is limited because you are not the vision caster, the lead leader.

You may have speculated, in moments of frustration or dreaming, that things would be different if you could have the reins, just for a season. You are sure that your communication style would be more effective, your handling of staff issues would shine, and bold new initiatives would be launched. You know that you would make the tough calls that need to be made, and at the same time you would win the world with your charisma. At some level, you may be chomping at the bit to move into the role of the first chair. It is only natural that you feel this way; it is not a bad reflection

on you or the leader that you follow. As one who is called to lead, it is simply the reality of how God has wired you.

Or you may never have imagined yourself in the first chair. You have neither the desire to make the tough calls nor the charisma to charm the masses. But you envision your organization becoming much more effective, much different than it is currently, and accomplishing far more as a result. You know that you hold a key position, and you want to be part of a great, enduring enterprise that is fulfilling its God-given calling and potential.

Whichever scenario you identify with, the good news is this resource has been written just for you! We want you to understand that you are not alone. God desires to use this experience in the second chair as a transforming season in your life. As you read this book, we hope you become aware that God has a specific role for you to play, and incredible potential for you to realize. This role challenges your ego, buffers your speech, and keeps you anchored in your calling. It is a place of growth and development, a place of real contribution, and a place that tests your commitment. God wants your best wherever you are, no matter the circumstances, no matter the comfort level of your chair. To put it bluntly, the chair in which you sit is not a La-Z-Boy! It is often the most uncomfortable chair in the room, but it can be deeply fulfilling.

What Is a Second Chair Leader?

A second chair leader is *a person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization*. This is a definition that we will break down and reinforce as we seek ways to put it into practice. Think about it: even though you are not in the first chair, your actions can change the entire organization for the better. Of course, you may struggle with the idea of subordination, or think it impossible to have an impact throughout the organization. Each term in this definition has multiple shades of meaning, but the second chair leaders with whom we spoke consistently demonstrated this picture.

Second chair leadership is unique because it is not strictly based on the power and authority of positional leadership. A person who is able to succeed by influencing others is a more effective leader than one who issues edicts to be obeyed. Leading from the second chair requires this kind of pure leadership because it seeks to improve the entire organization, from the first chair to the last, without the formal authority of being the first chair leader. Of course, most second chair leaders do have some degree of positional authority. Those who thrive, however, find much of their suc-

cess through influence and relationships. They bring a new perspective to the powerful concept of servant leadership.

You do not have to be the number two person in an organizational hierarchy to be a second chair leader. In fact, our definition can include anyone who is not the lead leader. Every organization has a perceived pecking order. In reality, your position may be tenth chair, or seventh, or third. In nearly any position on the totem pole, you are a *potential* second chair leader—a person in a subordinate role *who has an opportunity* to influence others and add value throughout the organization. You alone can choose how to develop and cultivate your influence for the benefit of the congregation. Regardless of where you are on the leadership development journey, there is room to grow and learn.

The distinction between hierarchical position on an organization chart and true second chair leadership is illustrated in the executive branch of the federal government. It is obvious that the president is the first chair leader, and the vice president has the official second chair position. In many administrations, however, the vice president's actual role is relatively insignificant. Which positions in the cabinet and the office of the president are the key second chair roles? Who has the most influence in setting and directing the national political agenda?

It depends. It changes from one administration to the next. Some of this is driven by pressing national issues—the economy, domestic security, international affairs—but the bigger determinant is the individual's relationship with the first chair (the president) and the individual's ability to work with others to influence the broader political landscape. This is the true picture of second chair leadership. A trusted chief of staff or press secretary can be a powerful figure, even if his or her official responsibilities and departmental budget seem to be much less than those of the secretaries of the treasury or defense.

Of course, even the first chair leader answers to someone: a board, the elders, shareholders, a bishop, the voters. Ultimately, in Christ's Kingdom, we are all in the second chair, submitting to Christ as the head. But for those who do not occupy the top position, the ways to lead effectively are distinctly different. These differences can be summarized in three apparent paradoxes that second chair leaders encounter throughout their careers.

Three Paradoxes in the Second Chair

A second chair leader's unique role involves a special set of tensions. Any leadership position has challenges that stretch the individual, but these general stresses are not our focus. The unique tensions for a second chair arise

because the expectations he encounters appear to be incompatible, or even contradictory. He is expected to be a bold initiator and faithful follower, a creative thinker and detailed implementer. The ongoing challenge is to do a variety of tasks and do them well. Being called upon to wear so many hats can be perplexing and stressful. We describe these tensions as the three apparent paradoxes of second chair leadership: *subordinate-leader*, *deep-wide*, and *contentment-dreaming*. They are paradoxes because at first glance they seem to be mutually exclusive. But our contention is that these pairs do not represent either-or choices. Rather, effective second chair leaders need to live within each paradox and master both ends of the spectrum. Some may experience the tension of one paradox more intensely than another, but all three paradoxes are woven into the fabric of being a second chair leader.

In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras contrast the “Tyranny of the *or*” with the “Genius of the *and*.” They explain that businesses trapped by either-or thinking are not nearly as successful as those that insist on finding a way to achieve *both-and* (Collins and Porras, 1994). Some companies decide they must choose between producing a high-quality product or one that is low-cost, but those that find a way to do both have long-term success. Some church leaders believe they must focus on evangelism or on discipleship, on reaching new members or on caring for the current flock. The ones that have enduring impact for the Kingdom discover a way to accomplish both-and. In the same way, effective second chair leaders discover the genius of the *and* in each of the three paradoxes.

The first is the subordinate-leader paradox. For many of us, our mental model of leadership involves having complete freedom to set direction and determine actions for ourselves and the organization without any “interference” from a supervisor. From this perspective, any submission to another person is less leaderlike. Effective second chair leaders do not have this sort of zero-sum view of organizational responsibility. They know that two heads are better than one, and that the first chair is not an adversary. They are able to lead without being at the top of the pyramid. Most important, they understand that their authority and effectiveness as a second chair stem from a healthy, subordinate relationship with their first chair.

The second challenge is abbreviated as the deep-wide paradox. Second chair leaders have specific roles that are narrower and deeper in scope than those of the first chair, yet they need to have a broad, organization-wide perspective. Some who struggle with this paradox resent the restrictions of their role as being too narrow, or they see the more detailed dirty work as being beneath them. At the other extreme, some excel at their specific tasks but fail to see the big picture. If an issue arises, they always

see it from the viewpoint of how it affects their ministry. Narrow leaders may have trouble negotiating the informal relational networks that are leveraged by second chairs who seek to have a broader impact on the organization. Effective second chair leaders develop the skills to be both deep and wide.

The final paradox is described by the tension of contentment-dreaming. Being the second chair does not mean giving up on individual or corporate dreams. But a dream cannot be allowed to become shortsighted ambition, nor can it be positioned in competition with the plans of the first chair. Second chair leaders intentionally seek to shape the organization's direction and mesh their individual dreams with the broader vision. They understand that an apparent detour from their dream may be short-term and even a catalyst to fulfilling their God-given potential. Successful second chair leaders are able to maintain contentment with the present without losing their sense of God-given calling for their future.

The three paradoxes represent daily tensions for a second chair leader. These are not tensions she chooses but the reality of her position and temperament. Although each paradox is present to some degree for every second chair, a leader's specific situation or personality may lead to extra stress in one of the three. In the pages that follow, you will meet an executive pastor whose hard lessons in his initial second chair role enabled him to embrace the subordinate-leader paradox when he returned to a similar role years later. Another executive pastor found the deep-wide paradox to be the essence of second chair leadership as he frequently stepped into interim and special-project roles, all the while keeping the big picture in mind. You will meet the copastor of a church plant who nurtured God's vision for several years while faithfully serving in an earlier, challenging ministry setting. She learned that contentment and dreaming can coexist. You will be introduced to a visionary leader who wrestled with all three of the paradoxes as he used his exceptional musical gifts.

The second chair requires a special leadership lens that brings clarity to the challenges of the three paradoxes. The lens must be trifocal, allowing you to focus on how you manage your relationships (subordinate-leader paradox), your work habits (deep-wide paradox), and your emotions (contentment-dreaming paradox). As you see and understand more clearly the tensions experienced in the paradoxes, you will be better equipped to navigate your way through them. Being better equipped, you will become a better leader, making a more significant contribution to God's Kingdom.

Being a second chair leader is full of challenges, but they are not insurmountable. As you will see in the stories of successful second chairs, it is

possible to discover the genius of the *and*. They are loyal subordinates and high-impact leaders. They accomplish their specific responsibilities with excellence while maintaining a broad perspective and seeking the best for the entire organization. They find contentment and personal growth in their present role while continuing to listen for how God plans to use them and see them prosper in the future. It is these paradoxes that we explore throughout the remainder of this book.

The Importance of Second Chair Leaders

Is a book specifically for second chair leaders really needed? One simple answer is, “Do the math!” It is obvious that the population of second chair leaders is much larger than that of first chair leaders. This fact alone makes a strong case for designing resources for second chair leaders.

The real reasons, however, are much deeper. For any organization to function at its highest level of performance, it must have effective leaders in second chair roles. A compelling explanation of this point comes, again, from management expert Jim Collins. His research in *Good to Great* shows that the organization operating as “a genius with a thousand helpers” will not have sustained success (Collins, 2001). Organizations that follow this philosophy have many people in second chair positions who are not allowed to be *leaders*. In contrast with this model, Collins’s research shows that organizations should focus first on building a strong and broad base of leadership. In other words, second chair leaders need to be in place and allowed to lead if a church is going to have enduring success.

In our interviews, we found many second chair leaders who made a significant contribution to their organization, in a variety of ways. Kim Miller took the idea of using the arts in worship and developed a creative, integrated worship experience that has become a central part of Ginghamsburg Church’s identity. Warren Schuh led a major restructuring of Calvary Community Church that was “like turning a DC-3 into a 747.” Dian Kidd’s pragmatic nature played an important role in bringing Union Baptist Association’s blue-sky thinking back down to earth. Glenn Smith was the driving force as Sugar Creek Baptist initiated and developed a church planting movement. Can second chair leaders make a difference in their organization? These stories, and others you will read, show that they can have an organization-shaping influence. As Preston Mitchell, of Fellowship Church in Dallas, said, “There are people gifted to be second chair leaders. We are the people who make it happen, and it is a joy to do it.”

We recognize that you might consider your current position to be an intermediate point in the leadership journey. You might use a less positive description for “intermediate point”; perhaps you consider it an unnecessary, unproductive delay. Your gifts and your sense of calling point toward a “better” chair—either a first chair role or a second chair position with considerably more responsibility. One purpose of this book is to encourage you to be patient and learn as much as you can in your current role. Too many leaders focus all their energy on moving to the next chair as quickly as possible, and they miss the opportunity to develop their gifts in the current chair.

After Mike completed his master’s degree in business, he was convinced that a first chair business role was the only goal worth pursuing. At one critical decision point in his career journey, he sought guidance from a trusted advisor. Over the course of several conversations, this man helped Mike see that his personal dreams and strengths might be best suited for a number two role rather than the corner office. This became a liberating idea that allowed God to continue redefining Mike’s ambitions and his identity. Whatever your current or future chair may be, you can learn valuable lessons today that will have long-lasting benefits. An attitude of contentment and a desire to learn are foundational elements of effective second chair leadership.

Second chair leadership, as we have defined it, is also biblical. Few books on leadership emphasize the concepts of subordination, adding value for the benefit of others, and developing influence without formal authority. But this is exactly the style of leadership that is modeled by Jesus and repeatedly taught in the New Testament. It is the style of leadership needed in the church. Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, says, “There is nothing like the local church when it’s working right” (Hybels, 2002, p. 23). We would add, “And when it’s working right, the attitudes and practices of second chair leadership are firmly in place.” Simply stated, today’s churches and businesses would have far fewer problems if the leaders—first and second chair—adopted these traits.

Second Chair Leaders in the Church

This book is written first and foremost with the church in mind, but the concepts of effective second chair leadership are applicable in any organization. This includes nonprofits and for-profits, volunteer-based organizations and businesses with paid employees, multilayered enterprises

and smaller ones. If your organization involves at least a handful of people, it is likely to have one or more second chair leaders.

When we look at a congregation, we encounter the same problems as in a business plus a few added wrinkles. A congregation is a complex entity because it includes both paid and volunteer leaders who have diverse opinions about the organization's ultimate purposes and the best means for achieving them. A business has a bottom-line to measure against, but what is a congregation's bottom line? In the same way, the *who* and *how* questions of congregational leadership can be very confusing. Some congregations cannot answer the question, "Who is the first chair leader?" In other churches, the pervasive culture insists that only ordained clergy can be leaders. Still others find it difficult to make a major decision because of a confusing structure or cumbersome approval process. Effectively leading the average congregation in America is every bit as challenging as corporate leadership. Unfortunately, the church has been slow to accept the need for a higher level of leadership from an expanded base of leaders.

It is no wonder, then, that the majority of congregations in America are struggling. The flat or declining attendance trend of many congregations and burnout among clergy are clear indicators of a problem. Lack of a broad, effective core of leaders is a critical factor in this stagnation. Yet the implicit approach that many churches employ is a variation of the "one genius" model. The senior pastor imparts all the ideas and is responsible for giving direction, and the members and other staff are expected to accept and implement. For the church to further grow in its redemptive potential, a new wave of second chair leaders is essential, men and women who work in concert with their first chair leaders to accomplish the mission that God has placed before them. The potential second chairs who are waiting in the wings need to step forward, and the first chairs need to encourage and empower them.

Effective second chair leaders in the church understand God's vision for their congregation, and they embrace it wholeheartedly. They are able to see ways to accelerate progress toward the vision. They can design and implement new ministries and overhaul old ones to keep the congregation on track. They can share the vision with others and expand the foundation of committed leaders and followers. They can lift the leadership burden from the first chair without usurping authority.

The same needs and opportunities exist outside the church as well. Denominational entities, parachurch ministries, and businesses need to increase the depth of their leadership bench. The lead leader needs other capable leaders if the organization is to accomplish its vision. Any entity

that seeks to increase its impact and its effectiveness needs second chair leaders.

The World's Greatest Second Chair Leader

“You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you” (Genesis 41:40).

There it is, the climax of the story! It is one of the greatest comebacks ever! Do you remember the young man who was known by his brothers as a dreamer, the one who wore the beautifully ornamented coat given to him by his father to signify his status as most favored? This young, arrogant dreamer was thrown into the bottom of a well and sold into slavery by these same brothers. Then, as a foreigner and former prisoner, he attained a rank of leadership that no other Hebrew in all of history has enjoyed. We do not know all that happened to Joseph, only what the Scripture reveals. But this is enough to show that his journey included some of the lowest lows and highest highs that life can offer.

For Joseph to finish as he did, a light bulb must have turned on somewhere along the way. There must have been a season when he discovered the meaning of second chair leadership. As a child in Canaan, Joseph showed no understanding of subordination; he expected his older brothers to bow to him. Nor did he grasp the subtleties of influencing others; all he needed to do was run to his daddy to get what he wanted. It was certainly not on his agenda to add value to the organization of Jacob and Sons, Inc.; he only cared about himself.

Life as a slave and as a prisoner taught Joseph many lessons. He was in a foreign land with a foreign language. He was no longer the favored son in his household. He had no position of authority. To survive this harsh environment, he had to find a way to set himself apart. So with no other choice, Joseph grew up. He apparently learned quickly and retained these lessons for the rest of his life.

What did Joseph learn and apply that set him apart? What principles can we glean from this great leader to foster our growth and development as second chair leaders? What can we learn from him that will strengthen and encourage us in our journey of service to our God? As we share from our personal experiences and those of others, we also seek to learn about the challenges and opportunities of second chair leadership from one of the best second chair leaders of all time, Joseph.

Wherever you serve, we hope that you will be inspired to honor God in all your ways. We pray that God will enrich your day-to-day living as

you find greater purpose and motivation to lead and serve in His Kingdom. Joseph discovered a much greater purpose in Egypt, and we have found joy in discovering God's purposes in our own second chair roles.

Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer" is an apt prescription for any second chair leader: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." As you read the chapters that follow, we hope you will learn from some of our mistakes, and find reassurance and encouragement in others. Now that you know the end of the story, let's see what it takes to realize the full potential of effective leadership in the second chair.