



CHAPTER  
1

## ONLY THE LONELY

For the first time, I (Sherry) walked into the room that was to be my office for the next school year. It was big and empty and smelled like paper and glue. I remember hearing a soft echo as I plunked my purse and briefcase on my desk, and thought to myself, *This is perfect. A nice quiet space to organize, concentrate, and get stuff done.* And so it began.

This was my first year as assistant principal at the urban elementary school where I had been teaching for five years, and I was ready to change the world in my new role. As I began to organize and unpack the few boxes I had brought with me, my principal walked in. After her greeting, she let me know that we'd meet for our first official administrative team meeting in fifteen minutes. I was one of two assistant administrators for this large school with one thousand students, and I was looking forward to working with my counterpart, an older, more experienced administrator. As I prepared to join my principal for the meeting, I noticed stacks of files being brought in and wondered briefly what they were for.

The meeting remains a blur in my mind. I jotted notes furiously as assignments came my way: sort the files, design new processes, meet with the upper-level team leaders, be ready to

communicate my new discipline strategy (I remember wishing I had one). The list seemed endless. So many terms and titles were thrown my way, and out of the corner of my eye, I glanced at Geri, the other assistant principal, sitting calm, cool, and collected with high-heeled shoes perfectly matching her smart outfit. I decided to follow her lead. Take detailed notes. Give a slight nod of the head indicating complete understanding. Don't ask any questions. Respond with "of course" when my principal asked if I understood. But I didn't. I was lost.

### FEELING ALONE

The first day of school came with the excitement of new books, sharpened pencils, and shiny lunchboxes. I was looking forward to connecting with my former team of fourth-grade teachers, but when their lunch break came, I was in a parent conference. The first week brought an all-staff planning meeting after school, and after I gave assignments and everyone split into their grade-level teams, I had a strange thought: now that I lead the teams, I don't belong on one. I hovered over the circles and occasionally joined a discussion, but I felt like the odd woman out.

Have you ever felt like this as a leader? Perhaps it's a vague sense of isolation because your role has changed and removed you from the familiarity of your former team. Or you are not quite comfortable in the role of leading others older and more experienced than you. Maybe the isolation is partly due to the facade you feel you have to keep in place that says, "I know what I'm doing. I have it all under control."

### LEAD ALONE OR LEAD WELL

I experienced my first dose of intense isolation at the first district meeting of administrators. With dozens of schools spread around the Houston, Texas, area, our gathering numbered about

sixty. Right away I noticed a couple of things. I was one of the youngest in the room, and though this was a profession typically comprising females, I was one of the few at the administrative level. I wondered briefly if I was dressed appropriately and all of sudden wished I looked older. As I looked around the room, it seemed from the chit-chat that everyone else already knew each other, so I found a seat and sank into it. I immediately dropped my purse. Not only was the noise loud, but the amount of stuff that rolled out was mind-boggling: five ballpoint pens, two of them broken; an empty tape dispenser; and a pair of sunglasses with one lens missing.

The discussion started, and I instinctively reached for one of the pens. I took copious notes, trying to track the threads of discussion and unfamiliar academic terms. This was my habit: don't ask about things you didn't understand, but research them later so no one will know you didn't know them. The discussion swirled around the room, with many of the men interrupting each other and stating their opinions firmly. It was easy to see their passion and love for their individual schools, and they didn't hesitate to disagree or offer an idea they thought was better. But I didn't say a word. I sat quietly observing, feeling younger and greener than I had ever before felt in my life.

I had landed this position because I had caught the attention of my district superintendent, an astute leader who didn't really care about traditional methodology and was constantly on the lookout for fresh ideas and a new approach. His sprawling inner-city district was struggling with test scores, but his concern went deeper than that. He had a passion for students to develop a deep love for reading and experience the true joy of learning. Two years before, I had devised some strategies to help struggling students with reading comprehension and was able to share them with not only my class but my grade level and eventually the entire school. I took the boring rules of comprehension strategy and put them into rhymes and games that engaged the students' imagination,

and slowly we saw our test scores climb and students take pride in their reading accomplishments. This visionary leader had taken note that I could see through the old ways and dream about the new. He saw leadership in me and called it out.

But this day, he was not impressed. He had been in the meeting and even directed a question my way about reading strategies, giving me an open door to speak up. But I was sure my ideas were small and would expose my lack of experience in a room full of brilliant men and women with years of teaching under their belts. Surely they had implemented far better ideas than I had ever thought of. I was young, I was new, and I figured I was better off staying quiet.

He didn't say anything after the meeting and waited a few weeks before coming into my office. He asked how I was doing and how I felt about my new position. The truth was I felt lonely. I missed the camaraderie of being part of my fourth-grade teaching team. I felt isolated in the overwhelming pressure of having to figure things out for myself. I felt paralyzed when confronted with complex situations and daily fought the urge to ask somebody else (somebody older and wiser) to make the decisions for me. I'm sure I didn't communicate very well what my struggles were, but I think he already knew them anyway. He began to ask some pointed questions. Who was I connecting with to ask for help? Had I done any research to find other young administrators like myself to talk to? Who were my leadership mentors? I had to admit I had reached out to no one. He then said some words that I thought about for a long time afterward: "Sherry, you can lead alone, or you can lead well."

Those were some big words to chew on. If what he said was true, and I've come to believe they are, I was limiting my own performance. I was making assumptions that my gender and age were debilitating factors and allowing myself to become an island. I was overwhelmed and not reaching out for help. I was trying to

figure it out alone, forgetting that everyone starts somewhere, and if I were to look around, I'd see that I was surrounded by dozens of brilliant leaders who could help me.

Though that conversation was hard, I let it be a beginning for me. I began to reach out and ask questions. I connected with other young leaders within my district and formed professional relationships with leaders in other organizations who could help me. I found a mentor who loved the Lord with all her heart and freely shared her wisdom. I also took a hard look at myself. I had to admit it was pride that made me think I had to have all the answers and give the appearance that I always had everything under control. It was way past time to give that up to God.

## A STORY OF LEADING WELL

I'm forever intrigued by sharp women leaders who don't fall into the traps I did, especially those who make bold moves and lean into the wisdom of others without hesitation. One such leader is Linda Rankin, a young, petite blonde from San Diego, California, who serves as the campus development director at Eastlake Church.

### **Linda's Story**

*The first time Linda and I met, I loved her confident smile that accompanied her quick wit and the fact that she cracked a joke within our first few minutes of conversation. As she shared her leadership journey with me, I was struck by how open she was to the leadership lessons that came her way.*



I first joined the church staff at Eastlake after serving as a family ministry volunteer for several years. My background was education, and I was quite happy as

a teacher to upper elementary students, so when the offer came to join Eastlake, I hesitated. I knew I was being called into ministry, but was this the right opportunity? I wouldn't have called myself a leader at the time, but in the Christian school where I taught, the other teachers looked up to me and often sought me out for advice and counsel and to be their spokesperson to the principal. God was definitely doing work in my heart. As I was finishing the school year, I got a call from my executive pastor, who asked me to come and help manage the family ministry staff while they looked for their next family ministry pastor. I wasn't sure I was up to this, but I felt God calling me.

In this position, I served as the mediator between the executive pastor and the family ministry staff. I sat in on interviews and asked questions, learning much about managing people and handling conflict. We quickly found our next family pastor, but shortly after the transition, I was again approached by the executive pastor, who said, "Linda, you are already leading our family ministry. Why don't we just hire you?" We rearranged our new hire to lead in another area, and I was moved into the family ministry position. I knew I was getting incredible opportunities because I was being faithful and following where God was leading me.

I wish I could say everything went smoothly from here on, but it didn't. My husband and I were struggling in our marriage and not sure where to turn. But again God provided. I was now part of a staff that was caring and supportive. Even through our family difficulties and my obvious distraction, I was trusted, developed, and saw my leadership responsibilities increase. I leaned into this support and shared my struggles openly, knowing that this was a risk. Sometimes in leadership, you can get sidelined if you are dealing with personal issues, but this wasn't the case here. My senior pastor and executive team gave me wise counsel, allowing me to develop at my own pace, giving me encouragement and support every step of the way. I'm thankful God helped me to be open and share my struggles.

The opportunity came to go with my executive pastor who felt called to step in as senior pastor of a church in the Seattle, Washington, area. I agreed to go with him for a year as his executive director as he worked on helping this traditional church make a transition to a more contemporary model. We felt this would be a great opportunity as a family for a fresh start, and so, holding tight to God's hand, we made the move. Did I feel qualified? No. Was I willing to work hard and learn quickly? Absolutely.

Our time line was quick. I had to learn new things in a very short amount of time. I had to, as Mike Bonem says in *Leading from the Second Chair*, "grow deep but also go wide," becoming an expert in some areas while retaining a

visionary aerial view over many.<sup>1</sup> I feel that I grew the most during this time. I was working long hours and learning new things every day. By making this move of obedience, God helped me grow in knowledge and also gave our family time to heal and grow together. I will always look back on this experience as a learning lab time in my leadership. It was a bold, scary move for our family, but God works miracles when we're not afraid to step out in faith!

After our first year of a successful launch and transition, we decided to move back to San Diego. I had learned much about developing systems and leaders and implementing strategy and was invited to join the executive team at Eastlake. Looking back to my teaching years, I wouldn't have labeled myself a leader, but I was now comfortable with the title. God had done amazing work in me. I would now be the only woman on this team, but I wasn't fearful about this and had confidence that I was a leader with bold ideas who could execute them well.

People have asked me how I handle being the only woman on an all-male executive team. Staying true to who God made me to be, I look and act like a woman, but there are times when I've learned to control my emotions to match those of the men in the room. There's a fine balance of getting your point across but not elevating the emotion, always communicating that your goal is to help. I'm one of the youngest members on this team, but instead of letting my age or gender isolate me, I lean into them as assets. My team listens when I try to bring a next-generation female's view to the discussion, and I know this view brings value to the discussions. I try always to communicate my respect and earn my seat at the table with a high level of integrity.

I sometimes struggle with the loneliness of leadership and turn to God often. There's heaviness with the confidentiality that comes with sensitive information. There are also disagreements. At the end of the day, if I've disagreed with the way a decision has gone, I feel lonely. We want our opinion to matter. When we feel strongly and things aren't going our way, it can be isolating. It's important to believe in the vision and have trust in our leaders. I often get on my knees, and cry out to God, "Lord, you know how I feel." The great thing is that I know my senior leaders are doing the same thing. I'm not alone. Everyone I serve with on the team knows we're not perfect, but together, we're going to God to refine us.

A turning point came in my leadership when I realized I had become an island when it came to decision making. In our Washington launch, we had not trained our leaders to make decisions for themselves, but since we had to make them quickly, I tended to make them all myself. I was becoming a bottleneck. I had to go back and release the leaders on my team to lead on their own and give them permission to fail. I grew in my leadership when I learned to establish

seasons of lengthening the leash, incorporating wisdom and trust. When you are a shallow leader, you tend to make all the decisions alone. A deeper leader develops others.

I think the biggest lesson I've learned as a leader is to not hesitate. It was always my tendency to wait and craft my thoughts before speaking them, but I've learned to act quickly and in confidence. I don't give myself time to second-guess myself. There's a tension between acting quickly and processing, and I've learned to manage it by leaning into the mentorship of other great leaders and asking myself some important questions, such as, "Are there pieces of information I'm leaving behind or blowing by?" I was intimidated early on in executive meetings and spent seasons as a listener and learner. But I learned there has to come a time when you step into a godly confidence based in biblical humility.

A huge lesson came through a hard conversation with one of my pastors. After keeping my ideas to myself in a team meeting, he challenged me as to why I was there. He said, "Linda, you were brought here for your good thinking, so bring it. If you can't, you don't belong here." This was a hard conversation, but I took it to heart. I've learned to check my feelings at the door. I may get shot down, but that's okay. I've come to trust the pastors in this group, just as they've come to trust me. They were patient, willing to give me the time and space to develop if I was willing to learn and take risks. That was a big question, and I've had to ask myself if I really felt God calling me to this level of leadership. If so, I needed to have the courage to be vulnerable and put myself out there.

## PRINCIPLES TO GROW ON

Linda's story and my own both illustrate that isolation is a common hurdle in leadership. Perhaps as you read Linda's story you might be thinking, *Well, sure, she had an executive team that encouraged her gifts and helped her develop, but what if I don't?* It's a good question, so let's answer it. One of the principles I've learned is that isolation is Satan's plan. You can't afford to buy in to the lie that there's no one out there to lean on to help you grow. Satan doesn't want you to reach out beyond your cone of silence to ask for help. He wants you to suffer alone, hoping you'll never attempt to use your leadership gifts or develop them. He wants you to see your gender





and age as roadblocks. They are neither. Lift up your eyes beyond your current circumstances and seek out someone a little wiser, a little farther down the leadership road, and offer to buy that person a cup of coffee. Then pick his or her brain!

## ENCOURAGEMENT AND CHALLENGE

Along the way, I've learned to lean in to two kinds of people: encouragers and challengers. The encouragers always have kind, affirming words for you that refresh you and keep you going, kind of like enjoying a cold glass of milk and a warm cookie at Grandma's after a hard day at school. These are the people who see your gifts and strengths and call them out to encourage you in your lowest moments. I have one such friend, Sibyl, who lives several states away, but in some of my most desperate moments, God uses her to pick up the phone and speak into my heart. With a voice like Carol Channing, she says my name, and I can hear the smile in her voice. Although she's far away, her words make it feel as if her arms are wrapped securely around me. Her timing is always impeccable and affirms in my heart just how much God loves me.

The challengers always make you think further, work harder, and push us to grow into all that we can be, like Bob, the personal trainer at the gym. He sometimes barks, and often his words are hard to hear, but they always help me grow to that next level. I've had various challengers in my life and have learned to grow from them even when their words or personality rubbed me the wrong way. One of the keys here is to shut down the defensiveness that threatens to rear its ugly head. Admit what you don't know. Listen for truth. Take on the attitude of a learner, and lean in hard to the wisdom that will come your way.

You need both encouragers and challengers in your life, and while sometimes their presence may not be immediately apparent

to you, they are there. To find them, look around and ask yourself a few questions: Who knows me well and has a comforting, encouraging presence I can sink into? This encourager needs to be another woman with a strong love for Jesus who can speak words of affirmation into your soul. For potential challengers, ask, “Who has leadership gifts I admire that I can learn from? Who is strong in areas that I’m weak in?” Look for someone grounded in biblical principles and humility that will speak words of truth into your life and open your mind to those outside your usual circle or vocation.

To take advantage of both types of people in my life, I’ve learned to keep a leadership journal, savoring the nuggets of wisdom people share with me: quotes, key conversations, recommended books and articles, and encouragement. I used to keep these tucked in the back of my Bible scribbled on whatever paper I could find, but it got out of control. I decided I didn’t want to explain to God why my Bible resembled a rat’s nest, so I’ve now resorted to a notebook.

## SO WHAT ABOUT YOU?

We were created to live in community. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us of this: “Don’t give up the habit of meeting together; instead let us encourage one another.” God created us with the need to lean into him and to others. Ask God to send those encouragers into your life and for the courage to be vulnerable and admit when your encouragement tank is running low. God also reminds us in Proverbs 27:17, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” Ask God today to send the challengers you need and the wisdom to seek their input. It takes courage, but God is here to help. Trust in the words of Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. These are plans to prosper you, not to harm you but plans to give you a hope and a future.” In this verse, God reminds us that he not only thinks about us but

has plans for us bigger than we've ever dreamed of. He goes on to say he's always home with the light on, and if we come knocking, we'll find the help we need.

Start today by spending time in God's Word, listening to his clear, calm voice, and leaning into both the encouragers and challengers he's placed in your path.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How do you handle the isolation and loneliness of leadership? Are there particular times of leadership when you feel most alone? Why do you think this is?
2. Do you feel your age or gender are isolating factors? If so, what's your plan to overcome this?
3. Do you have both encouragers and challengers in your life? What are the biggest lessons you've learned from them? If not, do you have a list of names to pray over as potential candidates for these roles?

