

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

*B. DAN B. ALLENDER*

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

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## Five Painful Realities of Leadership

For Allender a leader is “*anyone* who wrestles with an uncertain future on behalf of others—anyone who uses her gifts, talents, and skills to influence the direction of others for the greater good” (p. 25). While this definition includes everyone from mothers, fathers, teachers and pastors to various academics, professionals and CEOs, it is a difficult calling “to be reluctant, limping, chief-sinner leaders, and even more to be stories. . . . He [the Apostle Paul] calls us to be a living portrayal of the very gospel we beseech others to believe” (p. 56). We can

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

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

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

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

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

important purpose of the limping leader; rather, the maturing of char-

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

Allender helps the reader "probe deeper" into the raw material by identifying the faulty responses and the character flaws that lead to

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

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