

doug fields

help

I'm a student leader
practical ideas and guidance on leadership



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INTRODUCTION - Read This First!

Let me begin with a promise—if you read this book cover to cover, think about what you've read, and discuss the principles with other leaders, I promise you'll never be the same.

The book you're holding is filled with leadership tips and ideas helpful to your growth as a student leader. I've watched amazing life changes happen to students who didn't think they were leaders or who didn't understand Christian leadership—these students transformed into unbelievable leaders for God. If you're ready to discover more about being a student leader, then dig in, open up your heart, and prepare for God to do something great in your life.

I wish I had a book like this when I was a teenager! Like you I was a student leader in my youth ministry. If any books on student leadership existed, I didn't know about them. Actually, I didn't even know what it meant to be considered a leader. I was fortunate enough to have a youth pastor who believed in me and saw something in me I didn't see in myself. When I was in ninth grade, he said, "Doug, I want you to go on a leadership retreat because I think you have something to offer others, and I want to prepare you for ministry." Honestly, I had no idea what he was talking about, but I really liked him, so I said yes. (It's funny now, but my first act as a leader was to convince him to pay my expenses for the retreat. He agreed. I went. My life was changed, and I've never been the same. I guess I should pay him back now.)

I want to take you on a leadership retreat through the pages of this book. I hope someone paid for your trip (bought you this book), and I hope you'll commit to journey with me as I try to teach you what I've learned and taught thousands of students in more than 25 years of being a youth pastor. I wrote this book especially for the student leaders in my church because I love them and want to watch them continue to grow. Please read this as if you are a student in my youth group—a student I care about, someone I want to see mature in faith, a student leader who will impact the world for Jesus Christ, and someone who God wants to use to serve and honor him.

Are you ready for this leadership trip?

yes *no*

Do you consider yourself a student leader?

yes *no*

If either answer is no, what will it take for you to prepare for the journey and consider yourself a student leader? Think about that for a minute. If you see yourself having little potential as a leader, you'll be tempted to skim this book and move on without considering how these ideas, actions, and challenges could impact you and those around you.

The truth is, you have the leadership potential I'm talking about if...

1. You have a relationship with God.
2. You have a heart and mind open to learning and growing.
3. You want to help others.
4. You can handle being challenged.
5. You want your life to count for something.

Almost immediately you'll find out that leadership isn't about popularity. It's not about charisma, and it doesn't require you to speak in front of others. If you want to serve God and have a heart that gets excited about helping others, then you've got what it takes to be a leader.

Now does that describe you?

yes *no*

If you answered yes, I'm so excited to help you and challenge you!

Before you begin chapter one

Take a few moments to write down your current definition of *student leadership*. Don't worry about having a *right* answer—for the moment there is no correct answer. I'm asking you to do this because when you finish the book, I'll ask you to rewrite a definition of *student leadership* based on what you've learned. Then you'll compare the two definitions to see if you've learned anything and if our leadership retreat was worth your time.

I think it will be. I'm grateful to God for teenagers like you who want to make a difference with their lives. I hope to meet you someday and hear about how God is using you!

Blessings,

Doug Fields

Alyssa's Notes

At the end of each chapter you'll find a short summary including comments from Alyssa, a student in my ministry whom I asked to add her thoughts to each chapter. I think she's really sharp, caring, a lover of Jesus, and an outstanding student leader. You'll enjoy reading her summaries, and you'll see into the heart of a peer who is trying to follow Jesus, survive school, serve in a youth group, care for her family, and be a leader. I believe one day you'll be hearing her name, listening to her speak, or reading her books. She's a normal teenager like you who is serving God in great ways.

My Definitions

- My definition of student leadership (before reading the book)...

- My definition of student leadership (after reading the book)...

- After reading the book, I learned...

2

- If I knew I could do anything for God and not fail, it would be...

Today's date:



Student Leaders Serve

Radical leadership

If you asked the president of a large company for a one-word definition of leadership, she might describe it as *enthusiasm*, *drive*, *power*, *presence*, or *competence*. These words are often associated with the world's view of leadership.

But if you investigate Jesus' leadership requirements for his closest followers, you'll see that only one word makes it to the top of his list. It's not an attractive word that will make you want to race to the end of this book. Ready? Drum roll, please...Jesus asked his leaders to... *serve*. Serve! (Go ahead and reread it—I'll wait.)

Is it safe to assume that right now you're not too sure you want to be a leader if that's what leaders do? I understand—it's quite shocking at first. But if you want to follow the lead of Jesus, you'll find the primary objective of a biblical leader is to serve. Carefully read this verse to understand how Jesus wants his closest followers to act:

You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But

among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant... (Matthew 20:25-26, NLT)

Jesus' selection of leaders could be considered either insane or ingenious. But since he was God in the flesh, let's assume his leadership judgment fits in the latter category. The first 12 men he chose to lead with him included five fishermen, a tax collector, and six others whose occupations are a complete mystery. Sometimes we wonder why Jesus chose these men instead of those who were already seen as leaders. Whatever the reason, the greatest leader ever to live chose ordinary guys to lead with him.

Clearly, Jesus connected serving to leading. He deepened the definition of leadership when he described himself as a servant rather than a king:

“For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28, NLT).

Jesus didn't just speak about serving; he modeled it. He put the needs of others first and placed himself in positions where serving was necessary. Ultimately, this posture of servanthood led him to the cross—to serve the needs of humanity. He served without reservation, and the greatest act of servanthood was also the greatest act of leadership our world has ever seen.

Think about that for a moment. Jesus. God in the flesh. All-powerful, all-knowing, all God, and yet, all

servant—to everyone! He served the down and out, the sinner, the outcast, the lonely, and the poor. Leader? Yes. Servant? Absolutely!

As Jesus served, he created and led a movement with the potential to influence others! Given Jesus' actions, my definition of leadership would include two key words: *serve* and *influence*. Jesus did both. That's leadership!

If you want to be a leader—not just a student leader, but a Christian leader—you must learn to lead like Jesus. How? By serving others. When you serve others, you'll have the opportunity not only to lead, but also to change the image of leadership in your church, in your youth group, in your family, and in your school.

So instead of viewing your leadership role as a chance to exert power and voice your opinions, view it as an opportunity to serve. When you do, you'll succeed at leadership, and you'll grow to be more like Jesus.

Serve...like Jesus

The apostle Paul emphasized Jesus' servanthood and humility when he challenged Christians with the following words:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)

Paul told early Christians to be like Jesus (except for the perfection part—which is too bad since walking on water and casting out demons could be scary and fun). What does it mean to be like Jesus? It's more than wearing a WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) logo...it means taking on his character—being a servant.

As you read this book carefully, you'll see that leadership and service go hand in hand. (I desperately want you to understand this concept before you move on to the next chapter.) As a student leader, if you want to be effective, you'll need to serve others.

Many church-based student leadership programs are populated by the cute, fun, and outgoing kids who win popularity contests within the youth group. That's the wrong way to choose student leaders. Leadership is not about popularity; it's about...guess what? Serving. If you don't serve others, you're not a Christian leader. I don't care how popular, charismatic, and wonderful you are...if you want to be a leader, you must be a servant. Get it? (Got it!) Good!

Several students were immediately interested when I began to float the idea of creating a student leadership group at our church. But at our first informational meeting, I emphasized that biblical leadership (and leading like Jesus) requires servanthood and humility. Being a biblical leader wouldn't necessarily mean one would have popularity and power. My words disappointed many students. After that meeting there was a lot less excitement about leadership. Several students wanted to be leaders because they thought they'd be in front of

the crowd, make important choices that would affect the ministry calendar, and be consulted on youth group decisions. Servanthood never occurred to them.

Our student leadership team was small at the start because very few students were willing to serve. Few were willing to pick up trash, stack chairs, and go out of their way to befriend disinterested and lonely students. In other words, I had a lot of students who wanted to be known as leaders...but not many who wanted to serve as leaders. We were learning about the big difference between biblical and worldly leadership.

The backbone of Christian leadership is simple to understand yet very difficult to pull off: Serve. Master this task, and you'll become a powerful student leader. (If *servant* doesn't describe you right now, don't give up. Just keep reading and pray for God to mold you into the type of leader he wants you to become. Stay with me through the end of the book. I will challenge you, but I'll be nice, too. I promise.)

Even me?

I posed the following question to a small group of students: "Who do you recognize as God's leaders?" Most of the group thought I was asking a tricky question. A ninth grader named Jackson responded, "God's leaders are, like, those spiritual giants who have it all together and haven't sinned in, like, five years." Thankfully, Jackson was wrong.

I was excited to teach Jackson and his peers that all of God's leaders are imperfect and unqualified. Do you think that's good news? Do those words describe you—imperfect? Unqualified? (Yeah, me too!)

The Bible doesn't present one clear description of what a leader looks like. What God reveals to us about leaders through the Scriptures is full of variety and imperfection. Here's a quick glance at a few people God used to do great things:

- **Jonah:** God told him to preach in Nineveh, and he disobeyed. He went in the opposite direction, and yet God used Jonah to move an entire city away from evil.

- **Abraham:** He lied to protect himself (which almost cost him his wife). But he believed God's promise, and God called him righteous because of his faith. Abraham is considered the father of the Jewish nation.

- **David:** He committed adultery, fathered a child out of wedlock, had an innocent man killed to cover his sin, and sought God's forgiveness. But still God called him "a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). For hundreds of years kings were evaluated according to the standard set by David.

- **Peter:** He was an impulsive disciple of Jesus who, in order to save himself, denied he knew Jesus. Peter's

mouth got him into trouble. Yet God used him to build the early church.

God used disobedient liars, adulterers, big mouths, and fearful people. Isn't that amazing? Now, knowing that, do you think he can use you? Of course he can! God specializes in turning losers into leaders (just ask my parents, friends, and children).

Don't be so consumed with your past that you lose sight of what God can do with you now and in the future. When you understand that God can transform a murderer into a minister (Acts 9:1-31) and a prostitute into a protector of God's chosen people (Joshua 2:1-23), you'll know God can use you, too—blemishes and all.

After I shared this truth with my group, Jackson said, "Doug, when you give examples like that, it makes me think God doesn't care about my behavior. It seems like I can go out and do wild stuff, and God will still use me to be a leader." While Jackson made a fair statement, it's not an accurate one. Of course God cares about your actions. But if God used only perfect people, then Jesus would be the only biblical leader ever to have lived.

God has standards, and the Bible characters described previously were transformed when they humbled themselves before their God. They had to deal with the consequences of their actions, but God still used their imperfections and their humility to do great things.

The most likely candidate for leadership is the person who submits his life to God humbly, puts the needs of others before his own needs, and has a genuine desire to

serve. Are you willing to do that? When you give up your own desire to be built up in exchange for serving God, you'll be amazed at the results. You will be blessed, Jesus will be glorified, and others will grow closer to God.

Because God uses flawed people, today's leaders possess a variety of broken backgrounds. God finds ways to use them when their hearts are right, and when they're willing to serve.

Congratulations! You have what it takes to be a leader for God.

Do it quietly

Each week Taylor arrives early to set up chairs and tables for our weekly service. After he's done with that job, he puts pens and fliers on each table. Taylor's devoted himself to this job for about two years now. I think I'm the only one who knows he does this. Taylor is the kind of guy who doesn't want others to see his acts of service. He's not doing these jobs for the praise of his friends; he's committed to serving God.

Taylor's reward for his service is evident when I see the expression on his face as students begin to arrive. As they use the chairs and tables, read the fliers, and write with the pens, Taylor feels a sense of pride—not an arrogant pride, but a servant's sense of accomplishment as he gets to see his impact felt. He feels ownership for our ministry because he's made an investment with his time, heart, and service.

What I appreciate so much about Taylor are the ways his acts of service influence others. Yet Taylor doesn't serve to get credit. That's a picture of true servanthood: Don't serve for the recognition; serve out of obedience to God and allow that service to influence others. Plus, the praise you receive from humans can't compare to how God will bless your secret acts of service. Taylor embodies this principle of leadership because he understands the teachings of Jesus found in the following verses:

Take care! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired, because then you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give a gift to someone in need, don't shout about it as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I assure you, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone, don't tell your left hand what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in secret, and your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you. (Matthew 6:1-4, NLT)

When you show up at your youth ministry, you make a choice to be a consumer (where you are served by others) or a minister (where you serve others). God will use you in great ways when you come to serve others. When you serve without seeking recognition, honor, or praise, you'll be rewarded in a way that rivals the praise other people can give you. Would you rather have one person say, "Good job!

Thanks!” or would you rather have God know your heart, see your service, and bless your life? The answer seems so obvious. When you do something for the praise of others, the praise will be short-lived and incomplete. When you serve out of obedience to God, you’ll be rewarded in a way that’s almost impossible to describe with words. Jesus put it this way: “...and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:18).

God rewards your acts of service...your quiet obedience...your leadership through influence. God’s reward system can’t be defined, controlled, or manipulated. When you serve, you lead. And when you do, you’ll tap into God’s rich flow of blessings on your life.

A last leadership thought and challenge

I’m thrilled someone believed in you enough to put this book into your hands. I’m so proud of you for making the effort to learn about being a leader for God! I want you to be a leader, but more importantly, I want you to seek to honor God with your life. When you do, he’ll bless your obedience, he’ll reward your service, and he’ll use you to influence others in ways you can’t even begin to imagine.

Remember—leadership isn’t about position, power, or prestige...it’s about serving God and others. You can do that—I know you can! The challenge is to keep reading and learning—and looking for ways you can lead through your service. You can be a leader!

Alyssa's Notes

Honestly, when I first read this chapter, I thought, "Okay, great. I know being a leader means serving. I've heard it before; I'll hear it again. Just get on with another point." Then God convicted me of my pride a few minutes later. I realized that so much of the time I think of myself as a student leader who serves instead of defining my leadership as serving all the time. As Doug kept describing Jesus as our model leader and servant, I felt challenged to start striving to make serving a lifestyle, not something I do every once in a while. It's hard to serve all the time, but by striving to do this, we are inviting God to use us in amazing ways.