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# Empowering People For Leadership

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An essay by Grace Preedy Barnes

**About the Author:** *At the time of publishing, Grace Preedy Barnes, PhD, was assistant professor of college student affairs and leadership studies and coordinator of Operation Impact, an overseas master's degree program in leadership studies, at Azusa Pacific University.*

## Introduction

Christmas night my husband, Doug, and I returned from a wonderful day away with relatives. As we both settled down to a quiet evening together, I decided to read in the living room and turned on the stereo and lit the fireplace. I put on the "Three Tenors" tape, which I had just received as a gift, and allowed my mind to wander.

Earlier that fall I had been asked to teach three new-to-me courses for the spring semester at Azusa Pacific University, and so I knew that I had a lot of reading and planning to do. The encouragement to "throw out the old course outlines" and start afresh, if I wished, released me to think creatively late into the night. I not only felt energized by the environment but also freed to explore new ways of teaching and designing courses that would motivate students to learn and grow. As a professor I always look at a new semester as a fresh start, a clean slate, which utilizes the past but creates something new that builds towards the future. I remember expressing to Doug, "What an *empowering* evening this has been!"

## The Purpose and Nature of Empowerment

The term *empowerment* is popular today because in many ways it signifies the antithesis of old forms of power that were often tied to control, force, wealth, and violence. even knowledge has been used as a power to condemn and separate people in ways that become violent, restrictive, and controlling. This kind of power destroys rather than builds; it seizes rather than frees. But empowerment is the process whereby power is transferred and released from one person to another. It is the giving of power, rather than the acquiring of it, and it allows one person to get involved with another in order to remove distance and barriers.

Empowerment, however, is not just a handing off or delegating process. This too can be damaging if a person is not ready to be left on his or her own. The challenge of leadership is to know the needs and readiness of the follower. It is a balancing act of challenge and

support. I, as a person, am empowered when power that I do not have is released to me, not in a constricted, manipulative type of control that results in dependence or conformity, but in a way that allows me to express my God-given gifts and personhood. As Parker Palmer states in his address *Remembering the Heart of Higher Education*, "We must understand that the best leaders are those who evoke not the fears of other people but their gifts" (2).

Jesus engaged in empowerment when he set people free to follow, to serve, and to give themselves away. He did the unthinkable, the politically incorrect, the unkosher, the impolite by empowering such people as the adulteress, the tax collector, the leper, and many other "scum bags" of the day

Empowerment says, "Yes, you can, and you may" and "I trust you." As an empowerer I let go and release control of the other person, the out-come, the way things take place, and even the process. Empowerment is a giving of power that also provides for underpinning and support. Jesus said, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). The role of the Holy Spirit is that of guide and supporter, not controller or director (John 16: 13).

### **The Process of Empowerment**

In the process of divine empowerment we become partners with God, empowered to accomplish his work, to follow and lead at the same time, to be servant leaders. The discipline of obeying, following, and serving God ironically leads to the development of leadership that serves and energizes others. The more we obey and serve God, the more we are given responsibility to become stewards who nurture, enhance, and allow for growth and development in others. Max DuPree (9, 11) suggests that

"it is fundamental that leaders endorse a concept of persons. This begins with an understanding of the diversity of people's gifts and talents and skills.

"Understanding and accepting diversity enables us to see that each of us is needed. It also enables us to begin to think about being abandoned to the strengths of others. Of admitting that we cannot know or do everything...

"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader."

Who then is the servant leader? According to Robert K. Greenleaf (7),

"the servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant - first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: *do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?* And

what is the effect on the least privileged in society. will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?"

"Go ye into all the world and *empower*" (Matthew 28:19) - this is the force of Jesus' commission to "make disciples" in a ministry of baptizing and teaching that leaves people empowered and changed from the encounter. Often in carrying out this commission we reduce it to formulas guaranteeing specific outcomes rather than allowing it to release people to both be and do in a discovery of their giftedness. Parker Palmer in his book *The Active Life* explores the paradox of action and contemplation, and identifies the difference between instrumental and expressive action (23):

"The *instrumental* image, which dominates Western culture, portrays action as a means to predetermined ends, as an instrument or tool of our intentions. The only possible measure of such action is whether it achieves the ends at which it is aimed. Instrumental action is governed by the logic of success and failure; it discourages us from risk-taking because it values success over learning, and it abhors failure whether we learn from it or not... Only when we act *expressively* do we move toward full aliveness and authentic power. An expressive act is one that I take not to achieve a goal outside myself but to express a conviction, a leading, a truth that is within me. An expressive act is often taken because if I did not take it I would be denying my own insight, gift, nature. By taking an expressive act, an act not obsessed with outcomes, I come closer to making the contribution that is mine to make in the scheme of things."

One of the leadership questions becomes, how do we achieve goals and objectives for ourselves or for an organization and yet allow people to develop and contribute according to who God wants them to be and do? Graeme Irvine, president of World Vision International, has put it this way (2):

"Empowerment" can occur when people discover within themselves, their community and their context, the resources needed to bring about positive change, and begin to exercise control over their own destiny. This is good. As Christians, we believe this empowerment comes primarily through faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to the values of the kingdom of God He proclaimed.

"But power is seductive. It is prone to abuse in order to get one's own way, protect one's own position or advance one's own cause. It offers an illusion of security or influence."

The ones who have power, then, are the ones to give it away. Those who do not have it must be given it in order that they might enter the dialogue or come to the table. Empowering them becomes a great act of love because of the realization that the person being empowered may make serious mistakes with that power and the mistakes may even be costly to the individual who is empowering. Christ suffered a great deal of abuse

because of those he chose to free from bondage and allowed to participate with him (Romans 15:3).

The practice of empowerment as stewardship places information, resources, and power in the hands of those who are closest to the ones who are being helped or served. From an organizational perspective, it means, according to Peter Block in his book *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest* that our expectations of people in power must change. It means holding in trust the well-being of the larger entity - the organization, the community, or the earth. Service becomes more important than control. There is pride in leadership but humility in stewardship. Entitlement becomes empowerment run amuck!

### **The Practice of Empowerment**

Leadership today is vulnerable. In fact, it is wobbly. Historically, leadership studies focused on the influence of "great men" who had bigger-than-life influence on people and history. Later it was determined that certain traits were important. Since then, studies have led to a very complex view of leadership that is contingent on interactions between the leader, the follower, and the situation. The readiness of the follower, the complexities of the situation and the interaction between the person, the position, and the process are all important to the nature of leadership. The definitions of leadership have broadened. Leadership is fragile today because we are not sure what is needed. A study at Fuller Theological Seminary conducted by J. Robert Clinton has shown that *very few leaders finish well*.

Because of the speed of change today with urbanization, globalization, computerization, feminization, values confusion, and many other factors, we are having to look at new ways to view and develop leadership. The church's bottom-line imperative is to unlock the laity so that it can achieve its fullest capacity. The rise of the seven day-a-week church indicates that the role of leadership is spreading throughout the church rather than being focused on one individual pastor. Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant; for whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:11-12).

One of the other findings in Clinton's study at Fuller Theological Seminary was that significant relationships were very important to finishing well. Older styles of leadership often did not allow for nurture and the role of mentors, personal boards of directors, and systems of support that provide health and wholeness for individuals and institutions.

Paul the apostle seems to have practiced this approach to leadership development and church planting. His life and ministry demonstrated the incarnation of servant-leadership ideas in the way he selected and trained leaders and established churches. Paul saw himself as a servant of Christ and a steward. He encouraged people to serve Christ and others, and encouraged leadership development according to a person's giftedness rather than one's position or title (Ephesians 4:11- 16; emphasis added):

"And his [Christ's] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the *equipment* of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for *building up* the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to *mature* manhood, to the *measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to *grow up in every way* into him, who is the head, unto Christ, from whom the *whole body*, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when *each part is working properly*, makes bodily growth and *upbuilds* itself in love."

There are so many expressions of empowerment in these words of Paul. Unfortunately we so often keep people as children, dependent on ourselves and our programs, so that they are inhibited from expressing all that they are meant to be, not only in the body of Christ but in the work of God's kingdom in the world as God's partners. Our empowerment means fulfilling our functions as the bride of Christ and the stewards of this earth.

## **Conclusion**

Leadership today needs to be principle-centered with its focus on character and holiness rather than on personality and power. Education and training should provide principles that guide, participation that encourages ownership rather than entitlement, and leadership that is more organic than mechanical. Organic leadership is concerned with understanding the whole, relationships and processes. Leaders are gardeners and cultivators and are trying to encourage an environment that produces interdependence and energy. Leaders become facilitators and coordinators, mentors and servants.

As I reflect on the impact of these concepts on my own life, I can recall mentors who have empowered me as well as students who have dared to make radical changes in their own leadership styles and organizational structures. Many times these changes were jeered at or discouraged, but through perseverance dramatic changes took place that resulted in the empowerment of others!

Empowerment Leads To  
Release  
Freedom  
Personal Expression  
Development  
Growth  
Energy  
Aliveness  
Wholeness

Creativity  
Reproduction.

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