

## **Bringing Out the Best in Your Leaders**

*-adapted from the book "Leading Leaders" by Mac Powell*

*-additional information provided by Mountain West Church*

You probably already know that encouraging the people on your team can reap giant rewards of motivation, loyalty, and productivity. But you may not have given enough thought to the way you encourage others and your motives for doing so. There is a reason why Scripture mentions the principle of encouragement over fifty times: it's a powerful tool that helps people reach their potential. In this module we will focus on deepening your spirit of encouragement and developing your competency of bringing out the best in others.

### **Deepen Your Character: Encouragement**

The most effective encouragement is driven by a deep and abiding love for people. Many leaders try to be good encouragers, but if we focus simply on the activity of encouragement itself, we miss the opportunity to go deeper spiritually and to examine our motives. Why do we encourage those we lead? If we are honest, some- because we want them to like us. We may even be trying to consciously or subconsciously manipulate others so they will keep serving in a particular ministry role. Or we may encourage someone just to make ourselves look good in front of another person. But when we encourage others from an authentic spirit of love, we make it our sole intention to build up the person we encourage.

The author of Hebrews wrote to Christians who were tempted to fall away from the truth because of the suffering they were encountering. Life is often difficult. It's easy to grow discouraged, bitter, and tired ...even if you are a Christian. In Hebrews 3, the author reminds the early church of the generation that followed Moses in the wilderness as they journeyed to the Promised Land. Though they had a hopeful future ahead of them, they grew weary of the conditions in the wilderness, fell into complaining and disbelief, and as a result ended up wandering in the wilderness for forty years. The author of Hebrews warns these believers not to harden their hearts as their ancestors had done but instead to "encourage one another daily" (Hebrews 3:13). He gives encouragement as an antidote to a hardening heart.

Encouragement is so much more than just telling someone "thank you" or "you did a good job." When done well, encouragement has the power to shape a person's soul. Words of encouragement can infuse someone with a new perspective, a new level of faith, or a new way of seeing themselves. Encouragement keeps our hearts pliable, resistant to Satan's lies, and enables us to live with a healthy perspective of God and ourselves.

### **Scripture**

As you read the following Scripture, meditate on what the author wishes to communicate, and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you and challenge you about how

you can develop your character as a leader so that you encourage others in a way that shapes their soul.

### **Hebrews 3:12 - 13**

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

- Who has been the biggest encourager in your life?
- In what ways has that person encouraged you?
- What one word in Hebrews 3: 12 - 13 stands out to you the most? Why?
- Why do you think God repeatedly tells us in his Word to "encourage one another"?

On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate yourself as an encourager?

(1=1 am not a good encourager at all; 2 = I try but I know I'm not good at it; 3 = I tell people I appreciate them, but don't think I am a great encourager; 4 – I am consistent in encouraging others but have room to grow; 5 – I am a model others can learn from and emulate.)

Why did you give yourself that score?

What one thing could you do to become a better encourager?

Having examined the character trait of encouragement, we can now begin to work through the core competency for this module: Learn how to bring out the best in others through encouraging and challenging them toward maximizing their strengths.

### **Bringing Out the Best In Your Leaders**

Sometimes churches identify leaders, recruit and place them in a role, and pretty much leave them to it, without any ongoing equipping or encouragement. They have confidence that the individual can lead a team or a group, but often this assumption results in leaders becoming discouraged, burned out, and feeling underappreciated or under-supported.

Such leaders are often good leaders, but imagine what could happen if instead we made a good leader a better leader. Doing so requires giving them encouragement, providing ongoing support, and challenging them to continue to grow in their leadership. When we challenge a leader to grow in their leadership skills, there will be a trickle-down effect and the people they lead will also grow as a result.

John Maxwell's first law of leadership is "The Law of the Lid." It says, "Leadership ability is the lid that determines a person's level of effectiveness." It's true. Here's what I've discovered: the better a leader gets, the bigger the impact they have. And by focusing

on bringing out the best in your leaders, you can have a huge impact on your church or organization.

Let me illustrate. Imagine you are providing leadership for three leaders who report to you. Let's imagine that one of those ranks six out of ten on the leadership scale. Another is a five and the third one is an eight. As you provide coaching and encouragement to these leaders, you can begin to draw out the best in them. Over time the six grows to an eight, the five grows to a nine, and the eight also grows to a nine. Think of the cumulative impact this will have not only on their own lives but on those they lead.

For years I struggled in my leadership. In fact I had several people tell me in my early twenties that I wasn't a good leader. Then, when I was twenty-seven a pastor saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. He began to meet with me regularly—getting to know me, encouraging me, and challenging me to grow in my leadership. His investment in me radically changed my life by bringing out the best in me.

As a leader of leaders, you can have a huge impact on your church and ministry area, simply by bringing out the best in the leaders you serve. I've discovered there are three crucial elements that work together to bring out the best in others: **Know their strengths; Encourage their strengths; and Challenge their strengths.**

### **1. Getting to Know Their Strengths**

Now, if you can't identify someone's strengths, you certainly can't encourage them or challenge them to grow in their strengths. So to help you discover the strengths of those you are leading, try this exercise the next time you meet with one of your leaders, either at work or in your area of ministry.

Ask the following questions:

- Name three to four projects or goals you've been working on for the past four weeks.
- Where have you felt surges of energy during the past four weeks? What were you doing when you felt them?
- What fruit or results have you seen in the past four weeks? What are the specific things you did to contribute to that outcome?
- To what do you attribute those results? Be specific. What response have you seen from others as you did this work? "Reverse engineer what you did well. Think about what you did well and why. Write down the skills you used to accomplish those things.
- What do you learn about your strengths from these observations?
- What are two or three things you can put into practice over the next thirty days to sharpen that strength?

When you take someone through this process there are four outcomes:

- They will identify their strengths.
- They will develop their strengths.
- They will begin to use their strengths with more intentionality.
- They will increase their ability to develop others in that particular strength area.

The first step towards being a good leader is to know the strengths of the people. If someone is good at something and you empower individual team members. The next step is to encourage them to work them to use that strength, the organization wins and the individual wins. That's just good leadership. Let's look at ways you can encourage their strengths.

## **2. Encourage Their Strengths**

"The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life" (Proverbs 10:11)

We've all had that moment where we were impressed with someone's performance and felt the urge to give them a word of encouragement. Then, as soon as we open our mouth, the only thing that comes out is something like, "Hey, you did a great job tonight!" or "Thanks for your leadership. That was good today." While I'm sure they appreciate the praise, think of how much more powerful our words could be if we simply put some thought and intention into our encouragement.

Encouragement is powerful and can lift a spirit, shape self-esteem, and galvanize an individual's resolve to continue in the face of difficulty. Do your encouraging words have power, or are they just ineffectual comments?

Perhaps the key to packing a punch to our praise is looking at the components of effective encouragement. While there is much more to this concept than the following explanation, let's look at three simple but potent ingredients of effective encouragement.

### **i. Sincerity**

Before speaking words of encouragement, check your motives and make sure you're doing it to lift up the other individual, not to gain something for yourself. In Proverbs 26:28, Solomon warns us, "a flattering mouth works ruin". The Hebrew word for "ruin" comes from the root word meaning "to push, drive away, or cast down." If we're not careful, insincere words can have the opposite effect we intended, pushing people away instead of building them up.

I was having lunch with a young man one day who continued to sing my praises throughout the whole hour. Though I'm sure he wasn't an insincere person, his comments came across that way because he had never met me before that day. While I'm always up for a dose of encouragement, in this instance, I found myself pulling back a little rather than being drawn to him. Encouragement is always best served in a spirit of sincerity.

## ii. Specificity

If you want your words of praise to have more punch, then be specific with your encouragement. Notice the specifics of what people do well and consider how they impacted you personally. If you look closely enough, you can find little nuances that made something special.

My wife, Cindy, and I often watch the TV show Chopped on The Food Network. I'm always fascinated at how much detailed feedback the judges give about the look, taste, and flavors of each dish. They're able to praise or critique each chef in great detail because they've acquired a sensitive palate that enables them to taste flavors the average person doesn't notice. In the same way, we must look for and praise the specific detail of an individual's work. That kind of specificity takes encouragement to a much deeper, more meaningful level.

So instead of saying, "Hey, you did a good job, you can say something like, "When you led the small group discussion tonight, you really asked insightful questions that challenged my thinking in new ways. You have a real gift of making people think. I appreciate you using that gift to add value to my spiritual walk." Specific encouragement is meaningful encouragement.

## iii. Strengths-focused

God has gifted each of us in very specific ways. Each day, we use and develop those strengths. Over time as those strengths develop and mature, they become obvious to others. The Apostle Paul had been around young Timothy so much that he became very familiar with his apprentice's strengths. And then, at a very crucial time in Timothy's ministry, Paul told him to, "fan into flame the gift of God" (2 Timothy 1:6). By centering our encouragement on someone's particular strengths, we are helping that person to fan the flame of his or her strengths. Giving sincere, specific encouragement, focused on a person's unique strengths, helps them learn something new about themselves and deepens their wisdom and insights for using that particular strength.

I've always said that encouragement is one of the most overlooked leadership development tools available to us. It is a small investment we can make daily and it reaps a huge return. Solomon observed, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Proverbs 25:11 ESV). The right word, spoken the right way, at the right time, can impact lives in ways we may never know.

- Which of the three traits are you best at when you encourage someone: Sincerity, Specificity, or Strengths-focused?
- Which of these three traits do you need to grow in the most?
- Think of leaders in your area of ministry. What are some common discouragements they tend to face in their leadership role?

### **3. Challenge Them to Grow Their Strengths**

Great leaders not only know and encourage their people to use their strengths, they go a step further and work with others to develop those strengths. Escalating a strength of a team member energizes, empowers, and engages them at a whole new level. Don't just use the talent of your people: develop it. That's what this third step is all about.

I was having breakfast with a business guy the other day, and after a bit of small talk, he shared with me that he felt stuck in his leadership. I began my typical approach to this kind of discussion by asking some probing questions. As he defined the problem, I shifted to some evaluative-type questions. Next, as he began to reveal more about his situation, I took a rocket and launched a disruptive question his way. His reaction was so funny. He looked at me, then he looked away, and then looked at me again and said, "Wow, nobody's ever asked me a question like that."

I could literally see his brain cranking and going into a different mode as he considered the answer to my question. As he struggled to answer it, new thoughts, new ideas, and new insights started to explode in his mind. As a result, he came to a clear reason why he was stuck, and enthusiastically discovered the next steps he needed to take in order to overcome the challenges he was facing. Every time I've seen him since that day, he's thanked me for that conversation. He has told me so many times that our forty-minute talk changed the trajectory of his leadership. That's not my doing-it's simply the power of disruptive questions. Unfortunately, not many leaders use this level of questions with those they lead. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word "disrupt" this way: "to cause (something) to be unable to continue in the normal way, or to interrupt the normal progress or activity of (something)."

You see, when you're developing people, the thing you're fighting against is their current knowledge, their normal habits, their normal beliefs, their normal way of thinking. In order for people to really grow and transform in their leadership, there are times when we have to explode some dynamite in their thinking. In other words, we want to disrupt the normal way of thinking in order to stimulate change and growth.

### **Help Your Leaders Play to Their Strengths**

There are some things I'm just not good at doing. I'm not good with details, organizational communication, or follow up ... just to name a few. And the truth is that regardless of how hard I try, I will still be bad at these things. Oh, I may be able to improve slightly, but these will never be my strengths. But there is a little voice in my head that tells me, "You need to be a balanced leader. You should be good at... (fill in all the weaknesses)." It's that voice that influences me to hold on to certain

responsibilities instead of delegating them to someone more skilled. And when I refuse to give up the things I'm not good at, I simply wallow in my weaknesses.

Most people struggle with this same tendency, and that's why it is important you get to know the strengths of your leaders. It's easy to assume the leaders under us are confident and competent, when in reality they may have an inner voice telling them they are not a good leader. It's when they begin to doubt themselves, or even worse compare themselves to other leaders, that Satan can gain a foothold and sow a seed of discouragement that can lead to them walking away from leadership altogether. When you know your leaders, you can help combat these negative thoughts and reinforce their strengths.

That's what it means to bring out the best in others. Most people tend to be blind to their strengths or underestimate the power of their own strengths. They can become so focused on their weaknesses that it hurts their leadership.

Are your leaders wallowing in weakness? Here are four ways to help them stop this destructive behavior by reminding them of these truths:

**The organization deserves better.** If my organization has entrusted me with a job, then they are depending on me for results. So if I cannot deliver on the results because of a weakness, I should delegate it to someone on my team who can help.

**It drains me.** It's really odd, but if I spend time doing something I am good at (a strength), then it seems to give me more energy. But when I spend time doing something I'm not good at, it drains me. And when I'm drained, I can't give my best thinking and creativity to the organization.

**I rob someone else of the joy of using their strengths.** I cannot tell you how many times I have felt guilty delegating a task to someone because that particular task drains me ... so I assume it drains them also. But when I ask the right person to do it, they are thrilled because the task allows them to use their gifts and strengths.

**I lose time.** When I am operating in my weakness, a task takes me longer. So the thing that will take me four hours to complete may only take someone else one hour.

We can all focus too much on our weaknesses because our culture has told us we are supposed to be "well-balanced". But the most effective leaders are actually those who are imbalanced! They know what they're good at and they do only those things.

As leaders, there are obviously some things we have to do that we may not like or even be good at. Many leaders don't like doing administrative tasks, for example, but often this is something we just have to do as a necessary part of our lives. Yes, sometimes it

can be delegated, but not always. There are some things that just need to be done, and we have to learn the discipline of doing them, regardless of whether or not it's a task we enjoy.

I always tell my team that I want 80 percent of their time to be operated in their strength zone. The other 20 percent of their time is used doing the things they have to do but might not feel very competent in. I tell them they can trust God to use them, even in their weaknesses. Ask someone to name their weaknesses, and they can typically name off a laundry list of shortcomings without hesitation. But ask what they're good at, and many tend to struggle for an answer, people generally struggle to identify their strengths for two reasons:

**1.They're embarrassed.** Insecurities can keep us from admitting when we're good at something

**2. They don't recognize it as a strength.** It's easy to see our own. Sometimes if we're good at something naturally, we can be unaware of our skill level. A few months ago, a friend mentioned a strength he had observed in my leadership. It caught me off guard because it was something I do subconsciously and had never considered to be a strength. Because he pointed it out, I now try to develop and practice this more intentionally.

It's tempting to identify a leader's weakness and try to help them grow from a three to an eight in that area of weakness. But your time will be much better invested if you help the leader develop his or her strengths.

A final reminder, remember that developing and bringing out the best in those you lead is foremost for their benefit, not for yours. Yes, you will reap the benefits on your teams as people grow in their leadership, but our heart as Christians is to invest and see people grow into their gifts and passions. As volunteers and leaders under our care pour out, we get to pour in and see God grow people in amazing ways!