

# Growth Points

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## What Is a Leader?

People have studied **LEADERS** for centuries. To study **leaders** is to analyze the characteristics of **individual** people who demonstrate the ability to gather a group of followers. However, the study of **LEADERSHIP** is a relatively new discipline dating from about the year 1900. To study **leadership** is to inspect the **interactions** a leader has with his or her followers. Both areas of study require one to define a leader. What IS a leader?

Leadership  
is the  
ability to  
make  
things  
happen.

Answering this question is not as easy as one might think. Warren Bennis and Bert Nanus write, "Decades of academic analysis have given us more than 350 definitions of leadership" (*Leaders*). One of those definitions comes from Webster's New Student Dictionary, which defines a leader as "a guide; one who goes in advance; one who serves as a channel for others; one who directs on a course or in a direction." While this gives clues to what a leader is, it is a bit cumbersome.

One well-respected author on leadership, Oswald Sanders, said a leader is simply a person with the ability "to influence others" (*Spiritual Leadership*). This is the definition that today's leadership expert John Maxwell prefers, i.e., leadership is influence. Such a simple definition means that just about everyone is a leader in some capacity, e.g., a mother who influences her children, a teacher who influences his students, and a coach who influences his players are all leaders. The

advantage of this definition is that everyone is a leader. The disadvantage of this definition is that everyone is a leader! To some degree, if everyone is a leader than no one is a leader, i.e., this definition is too simple to have much meaning.

To say that a leader is able to influence others is a good beginning. Yet, this definition brings up the question "For what are the followers being influenced?" Ted Engstrom, a highly respected Christian leader from last century, provides a partial answer when he defines a leader as a person who has the "ability to make things happen" (*The Making of a Christian Leader*). Engstrom's definition suggests that true leaders make things happen, or another way

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# Leaders move people in a new direction.

## Servant leadership is not passive.

to say it is leaders create movement. Thus, a mother or teacher or coach is only a leader when he or she causes followers to move, i.e., something must happen in the follower's lives.

Perhaps the clearest understanding of a leader comes from leadership experts Bennis and Nanus, who note that a leader has “the quality of influencing others to move in a new direction often characterized by vision and change” (*Leaders*). This definition is what Christian leaders are all about, i.e., getting followers to change. The Christian is to live a dynamic life of growth, both personally and corporately. Individual Christians are to grow in their spiritual lives, as they learn to trust and follow Christ more and more each day. Likewise, churches are to grow in the process of making new disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

### What about servant leadership?

In all areas of the Christian's life, the best example of a leader is Jesus Christ, and he expressed his leadership in the form of a servant, a point he made clear in saying, “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

The Bible uses the terms **servant** and **service** in two main ways: (1) in reference to servitude, slavery, bondage, submission and obligation to another; and (2) in reference to ministry through willing acts of compassion, helpfulness, sensitivity to need, assistance performed on behalf of another.

Thus, a Christian leader serves not for his or her own praise or glory but for the good of the group, for example, the good of a local church. Experienced leader Fred Smith affirms this aspect when he says, “Leadership is not a title that grants you license to force others to knuckle under, it's a skill you perform, a service you render for the whole group” (*Learning to Lead*).

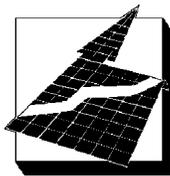
Yet, servant leadership is not passive, as Smith explains, “you lead by serving, but the major expression of your service is your leadership. . . . leadership is what enables an organization to bridge the chasm between where it is and where it should be” (*Learning to Lead*). The best Christian leaders serve the group by taking the group in a new direction, to a better place, to dynamic growth-spiritually and numerically! When the leader does not seek to move the group to a better place, leadership is not happening. The leader may be pastoring, or caring, or loving, but without movement forward to a new vision, little leadership is taking place.

Are you a leader? Where are you taking your followers?



Gary L. McIntosh is editor of *Growth Points* and speaks at several leadership events each year.

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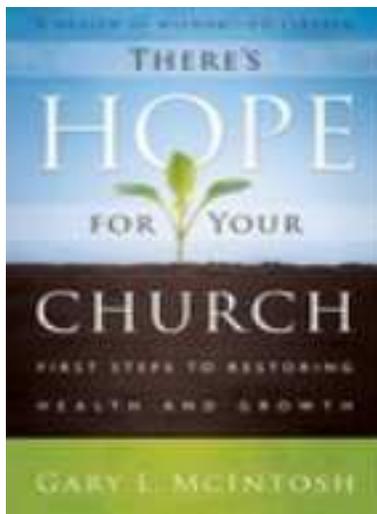
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