



Leaders

BOOK SUMMARIES

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Leading From the Second Chair

Serving Your Church, Fulfillin Your Role, and Realizing Your Dreams

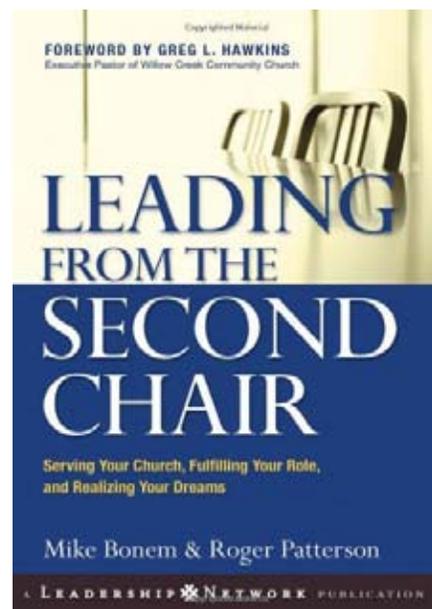
THE SUMMARY

There are an abundance of resources out now on the topic of leadership; books, seminars, and webinars on the topic of “how to lead” or “how to be a better leader” are easy to find. But as we have interacted with leaders, we have picked up a theme: the majority of the resources out there are focused on the senior leader, or first chair leader. We began to hear a desire for material that was focused on the unique challenges of being in the second chair. Those in the second chair face unique challenges that are different from those in the first chair.

Being a second chair leader is the ultimate leadership paradox. It is the paradox of being both a leader and a subordinate, having both a deep and wide role, and being content with the present while dreaming about the future. Those who thrive in this role learn to live with the tension, and even prosper in the midst of it.

Chapter 1: Living in the Paradoxes

A second chair leader is a *person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization*. Second chair leadership is unique because it is not strictly based on the power and authority of positional leadership. While most second chair leaders have some



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degree of positional authority, those who thrive find much of their success through influence and relationships.

You don't have to be the #2 person in an organization to be a second chair leader; our definition can include anyone who is not the lead leader. In nearly any position on the totem pole, you are a potential second chair leader—a person in a subordinate role who has an opportunity to influence others and add value throughout the organization.

Leading from the second chair involves a special set of tensions. We describe these tensions as the three paradoxes of second-chair leadership: *subordinate-leader*, *deep-wide*, and *contentment-dreaming*. These three paradoxes (which we will explore in subsequent chapters) represent daily tensions for a second chair leader, and require a special "leadership lens" that brings clarity to the challenges of the three paradoxes. That lens is trifocal, allowing you to focus on how you manage your relationships (subordinate-leader), your work habits (deep-wide), and your emotions (contentment-dreaming).

For any organization to thrive, second chair leaders must do well. Do the math—there are a lot more second chair leaders than first chair leaders! They need to be equipped, supported, and most of all—allowed to be leaders. A lot of second chairs see their current position as an intermediate point or stepping stone towards the goal of a first chair. One purpose of this book is to encourage you to be patient and learn as much as you can in your current role. Too many leaders focus all their energy on moving to the next chair as quickly as possible, and miss the opportunity to grow and develop their gifts in the current chair.

Chapter 2: Am I a Second Chair Leader?

Your title or position may imply you are a second chair leader, but the question really is, "Are you a second

chair leader?" Are you adding value throughout the organization? That actually has little to do with your official position; it has everything to do with what kind of influence you have. As John Maxwell says, "Leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less."

Regardless of your official position, your influence will grow as you build strong relationships, make wise decisions, give good counsel, etc. While it is certainly easier to obtain influence if you are the first chair (who is preaching regularly, guiding decisions, participating in key leadership groups, etc.) it is just as important for the second chair. It may take longer; building credibility requires patience, persistence, and consistency. It requires a spirit of teamwork and cooperation. It isn't easy, but it is absolutely necessary if you are going to be effective.

In order to get a good picture of effective second chair leadership, let's break down our definition:

- *A subordinate.* Even the most capable second chair is still under the leadership of someone else. The first chair may have an egalitarian style, but they are still the leader.
- *Whose influence.* Influence is evident in people's readiness to follow you and their desire to include you in key decisions and initiatives.
- *With others.* Any leadership role involved a broad network of relationships, with many people, so successful second chair leaders must excel at relationships.
- *Adds value.* Adding value can be seen in helping make better decisions, in adding creativity to programs, strengthening team relations, or being a sounding board for a colleague. Adding value means looking for ways to improve the organization and help those around you be more successful.
- *Throughout the organization.* Besides their particular area of responsibility, second chairs have an organization-wide perspective.

Chapter 3: Taking it From the Top

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Whether you feel effective or not in your role as a second chair, it probably has a lot to do with your relationship with your first chair. If the relationship is healthy, you'll find a sense of freedom and fulfillment in the job, irrespective of the responsibilities assigned. But if there is tension, it is difficult to feel successful, even if the organization is flourishing. That's why anyone who aspires to realize his or her own potential as a second chair leader must start at the top, with the top relationship that is.

That relationship between the top two chairs is critical. These leaders are often attracted by the other's opposite strengths because they recognize the value of complementary skills. But those differences can sow the seeds of conflict. Complementary strengths can pull in opposing and divisive directions if the relationship is not cultivated.

A key question for any second chair is: are you willing to be subordinate? For most leaders, "subordinate" is not an appealing word; it seems to be the opposite of "leader." But we believe that effective second chair leaders practice both. So what is subordination? It's recognizing and accepting that you are not the lead leader. It is acknowledging that you do not have the final authority, nor do you have the ultimate responsibility. But it is more than recognition and acceptance. It includes serving with humility and gladness.

Subordination grows out of reverence for God, recognizing that He is the ultimate source of authority. It requires loyalty to the first chair, covering his back when the heat is on. It includes recognizing that God has called the first chair to that role, and being committed to supporting him in his work.

The real test of subordination comes when your first chair does something you dislike or disagree with. What do you do then? There are three options:

- **Fight:** openly disagree with and challenge your first chair.

- **Flight:** walk away wounded and feel like giving up.
- **Stay Involved without confrontation:** you accept the decision for what it is, but stay involved in the discussion, accepting the first-chair's final decision, whatever it may be.

Being deeply involved and not being insubordinate, even in disagreement, is the tension of the role.

You may know that the relationship with the first chair leader is important, but are your words and actions consistent with that? Ask yourself this question: "Would I rather have the right answer, or the right relationship?" This question often confuses second chair leaders, who don't believe they should have to choose. In an ideal world, you wouldn't have to. But in the real world of human frailty, egos, and miscommunication, this trade-off is common. Learning to put the relationship first opens the door for more influence later.

For second chair leaders, developing trust is more important than any other character quality or ministry skill. It lays the foundation for an effective partnership. Reaching a level of complete trust requires faithful service, but more than that it requires patience over a long period of time. What, specifically, is required to build the kind of trust that maximizes a second chair's ministry?

First, it means staying in relationship and being willing to be subordinate. But that doesn't mean playing it safe—second chair leaders need to be bold and make a difference in their organization. Mutual respect, complementary skills, and common vision and passion are also key qualities. The final trust builder is simply time—if you aren't prepared to be patient while trust grows, you are unlikely to reach your full potential as a second chair leader.

When your relationship with your first chair is filled with trust and your gifts complement each other, many benefits follow. Communication improves, and the entire work environment becomes more relaxed

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and enjoyable. The entire team actually becomes more unified. Ultimately, the benefit of being in a right relationship is the opportunity to see your ministry, and that of those around you, soar to the next level.

On the other hand, if your relationship with your first chair isn't good, negative consequences will follow. Frequently a loss of confidence results in being micromanaged; other times your input may not be sought as frequently. If the ultimate benefit of a right relationship is growing influence, the ultimate consequence of a wrong relationship is lost influence and lost opportunity. The best way to counteract this is to be sensitive to the relationship and remedy any problems quickly.

Chapter 4: Crossing the Line

Even after spending years building a strong, trust-based relationship with your first chair, there will be points of conflict. Discord may be caused by personal clashes, unresolved issues from the past, or differing visions. Another major cause of conflict is when the second chair crosses over an invisible line. Something said or done is perceived as overstepping authority, or even bordering on insubordination. Since a second chair is a leader, it's natural for her to take initiative—which can lead to problems. In short, when a well-meaning second chair takes initiative, she may unintentionally run counter to the desires of the lead leader. She crosses a line.

Healthy, long-term relationships between first and second chairs require three things: recognition of the existence of the line, flexibility in placement of the line, and caution in crossing the line.

We need to recognize that a line exists. It defines responsibilities and authority, and it is much more than what is conveyed in a job description. Second, those who cross the line do so at their own peril. Crossing the line is insubordination, and the relationship between the chairs cannot survive if insubordination ex-

ists. Third, it is possible to proactively move the line. It takes time and trust, but second chair roles can be reshaped. To bring it back full circle, many second chair leaders begin to have problems when they accidentally cross a line they *failed to recognize*.

So how does a second chair identify a line? It is almost always more than the official job description. Often it includes special assignments. Ultimately, you learn where the lines are by both observing the style and preferences of the first chair and by pursuing good communication. When in doubt as to where a line is, ask for clarification. It's also true that time is on your side—the longer you serve with the same first chair, the clearer the line tends to become. Experience is a great teacher for finding the line.

If you don't know where the line is, there is a good chance you will cross it. Even if you have a clear understanding of the line, you may still step over it sometime in your career. But it's a risky thing to do. Sometimes it is accidental; in that case all you can do is apologize.

The more troubling type of line crossing is intentional. This occurs when you know where the line is and decide to cross it anyway. This is insubordination. When you cross the line on purpose, you abandon the subordinate-leader paradox. You decide that it is more important to be right on an issue than in right relationship. Except in *rare* cases, crossing the line intentionally is unacceptable.

When is it permissible to cross the line? If you have been seriously mistreated by your first chair, it may be appropriate to seek outside assistance. That doesn't mean a simple disagreement; it means a pattern of harmful behavior. The second case occurs if you are certain that the first chair is guilty of a serious moral or ethical failure. Either type of instance should be rare. Note: losing an argument does not merit seeking outside help; failure of a new program that was championed by the first chair is not the same as moral failure.

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Sometimes you know where the line is but are simply unhappy with it. In that case, how do you move it? Wanting to move it usually means you are seeking to expand the scope of your responsibility and authority. The first step is to be faithful with the tasks you have been given. The second is to take an honest look at your motives—why do you want to move the line? If it is for self-promoting reasons, slow down. Even if your motives are pure, if they could be misconstrued by others as self-promoting, you may want to slow down.

As long as you are a second chair leader, the line is not going away. Don't think of the line as a prison; rather it is a challenging balancing act. It requires the second chair leader to be both a loyal, dependable subordinate and a highly effective leader.

Chapter 5: A Matter of Perspective

Can someone in the second chair really add value *throughout* the organization? After all, the second chair seems so restrictive at times. Is the ability to have such broad influence limited to those who have an official title that conveys organization-wide authority and responsibility? The truth is that adding value throughout the organization is not a function of position; it is a matter of perspective.

Some second chair leaders primarily see the big picture, but get lost in the details. At the other end of the continuum are the leaders who have deep knowledge of their specific area of responsibility but often fail to see how their actions and activities affect other parts of the congregation. The challenge for a second chair leader is to be both deep and wide: to be effective in a particular area of ministry while maintaining a broad, church-wide perspective.

How can you develop a deep-and-wide perspective? The most important concept for learning to see deep and wide is *systems thinking*. Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for

seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static "snapshots." Systems thinking helps you understand that a change in one aspect of the congregation ripples through the rest of the body. For example, hiring a new children's minister often results in more families coming to the church, which requires adding new adult Bible studies (and teachers), which affects building room usage, etc.

In order to develop a systems perspective, you need to ask lots of "why" and "what if" questions. Why did our attendance increase? Why did our giving go down? What will happen if we add a second service? The point of asking is to gain a broader perspective, so don't just ask your first chair—ask everyone you can. And be willing to answer questions—having others ask you questions will help you think through your ideas.

We have all known the stereotypical visionary leader with lots of great ideas that lack practicality and are never implemented. That's not what we are talking about with systems thinking. Systems thinking requires seeing the forest and the trees. Attention to detail begins with seeing the trees in your own area of responsibility. Know the people, the problems, and the opportunities. Beyond your specific assignments, you also need to practice systems thinking for the whole congregation, which will mean you will begin to see gaps that are not being addressed. It sounds like a lot, but the most effective second chair leaders develop a deep-and-wide perspective that allows them to be effective in their particular area of responsibility and to add value throughout the organization.

Chapter 6: Building the Team...One Relationship at a Time

For Greg Hawkins, the path to becoming executive pastor at Willow Creek was through relationships. In 1996, after facilitating Willow's first strategic planning process, Greg joined the senior leadership team

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and led implementation of the plan. While he had a large responsibility, no one actually reported directly to him. 18 months later, when he became executive pastor, he became the only direct report to Bill Hybels; everyone else reported to Greg. While this was a major shift, it went almost unnoticed, because of the relationships he had built earlier; everyone already viewed him as a leader among peers.

Too many second chair leaders think they have to wait for formal authority, as indicated by lines and boxes on an organizational chart, before they can truly have an impact on their organization. Greg's story illustrates again that leadership is influence. In fact, a staff member who cannot lead through influence should not be given additional authority. Just as you need a healthy relationship with your first chair, you also need to build strong, trust-based relationships with peers in your organization.

One of the common themes that emerged as we spoke with second chair leaders was the value of being part of close-knit, highly effective teams. Generally 4-10 people in size, these teams had a common vision for what God wanted to do, and a conviction that a team is the only way to accomplish it. Leaders described their teams as collaborative, mutually dependent, and typically operating by consensus. The unique gifts each person brought to the table were valued, and everyone worked hard.

It takes time for an effective team to develop; it doesn't happen by decree. The emergence of a functioning team typically occurs over months or years. It takes time to develop a deep understanding of each other's unique abilities, as well as to learn how to communicate and make decisions together.

When a true team emerges, performance improves because collectively they can make better decisions on the important issues facing the organization not because team members like each other better. One critical dimension is the ability of each team member to speak into any part of the organization. That is the essence of a collaborative environment.

Note: team dynamics are more complicated when the composition includes both staff members and volunteers. If that is the case, you need to be precise about the roles that are expected of all members. If it isn't clear, people will define their own jobs and make develop expectations of others that may not be accurate.

This obviously requires communication, which is often lacking in teams. Volunteers aren't present at all the informal conversations and meetings that staff are part of, so they may not have all the information they need to understand and do their job. Don't assume that someone has told them the latest or that they have figured it out. Go the extra mile to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Chapter 7: Putting it Into Practice

Being deep and wide is the essence of how second chair leaders spend their time; it's how they fulfill their God-given potential. In practice, second chair leaders need to be flexible in their job. If you see the big picture and define your role as whatever is best for the organization, your specific duties are certain to change over time. Being deep and wide requires you to be a generalist, as well as demonstrating competence in specific areas. The respect and credibility that your competence brings is what gives you a platform for speaking into other areas.

There are four particular practices that can make you deeper and wider as a leader:

Be a Pulse Taker. Knowing what others are thinking and feeling is valuable information for you and the first chair; you are in a unique position to keep a finger on the pulse of the organization. Often the senior pastor has the worst seat in the house when it comes to pulse taking—many members just don't tell him what they are really thinking.

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For many second chair leaders, a firm rule governing their relationship with the first chair is “no surprises.” As the second chair, it’s your job to know what is going on and give him advance notice of the problem or issue. He should know about the problem before the phone rings. To do that effectively you must keep your finger on the pulse of the organization.

Be a Vision Amplifier. While the first chair is the primary vision caster, a second chair leader has many opportunities to repeat, clarify, and reinforce the vision. In taking the pulse, you also have an opportunity to influence the pulse. Every significant conversation you have with a leader is an opportunity to help that person understand the vision. (Of course, that means you have a clear understanding of the vision—not just the words, but the heart of it).

Be a Leader Multiplier. Identifying and recruiting other leaders who can help achieve the vision should be an ongoing priority. As you amplify the vision, you will become aware of people who are excited about it and have leadership potential. Any God-given vision requires a growing base of leaders, and every organization has people who are not maximizing their potential (especially churches). It should be a focused priority to get those people in the game and help them develop.

Be a Gap Filler. If there is no other leader who can serve in a critical role, the second chair should be prepared to fill the gap. This role seemed to resonate most deeply with many of the second chairs we have spoken with. Gap filling is often a function of the first chair’s strengths and weaknesses. No one excels in all areas of leadership. Whatever the first chair’s weaknesses may be, the strongest and most effective organization is created when the second chairs fill those gaps.

A word to first chairs: if you really want your second chairs to be deep and wide, you have to especially embrace the wide—allow them to participate in the big picture. That’s more than going to a meeting; it is being intimately involved in shaping the picture. That

means letting go of a degree of control. While not always easy for first chairs, the benefits are worth it.

Chapter 8: Contentment in the Second Chair

The contentment-dreaming paradox captures the internal struggle we all encounter as leaders. This tension stems from our own understanding of our dreams and calling. Whether you believe God has called you to a first chair role, or you believe you are called to be a second chair, you will have seasons of internal struggle, when your heart’s desire seems incompatible with serving faithfully and diligently wherever God has currently placed you.

But if you strive to find contentment today, God can begin to teach you to become all that you dream of being tomorrow.

Contentment in the second chair is your choice to stay and grow and excel, for a season, regardless of current circumstances. The foremost part of this definition is that contentment is a *choice*. Contentment is possible if you choose to understand that something more is always at work in your experiences, beyond your needs, expectations, and frustrations.

We all go through seasons of waiting, whether in a prison experience or something less drastic. Even if we are not waiting for God to move us somewhere else, we may have to wait for an organization that does not change quickly enough. How we respond while waiting tells us (and those around us) much about our faith. Two competing forces pull at us during these seasons: the pace of society and the grace of God.

The pace of society tells us we should always be on the lookout for the next opportunity, never staying in one place too long. To adopt that approach makes experiencing contentment difficult; it’s a recipe for dissatisfaction. On the other hand, God’s grace can offset and overcome our impatience. In the challeng-

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ing seasons of waiting, we have a unique opportunity to experience the grace of God at a whole new level.

How can we experience God's grace as we seek to find contentment in the second chair? While there is no particular formula, there are some sources of contentment to keep in mind:

- Your identity in Christ, and making your own spiritual growth a priority.
- Remembering your calling will help you stay anchored.
- Contentment can be encouraged through developing healthy relationships.
- Celebrating the fruit of ministry helps you see how you're making a difference.

There are some significant challenges to contentment that we need to face and overcome. Some are outside our control: our first chair changes, or church finances decline forcing you to shelve a much-anticipated program. Other forces are more within your control: *lack of patience* with God's timing, *lack of awareness* of God's bigger picture, and *lack of skills* to do the work that is required.

Lack of patience is the most obvious. It's easy to get frustrated when things don't happen as fast as you want them to. But patience is a choice, and it positions you to go through God's development process. Impatience can be fueled by lack of awareness of God's plans at work in our lives and our ministries. We fall prey to this ignorance when we think that leaving our current ministry situation will solve all of the problems we are having in the second chair. The grass isn't actually always greener on the other side. Finally, lack of skills to accomplish the requirements of your job will surely challenge contentment. You can't be content and be dissatisfied with your own job performance.

Chapter 9: Dreaming in the Second Chair

What are your dreams? In your heart of hearts, what do you long to see God do in and through your life? These questions lie at the heart of your leadership journey. They drive your sense of destiny and purpose in life. Vocational second chair leaders often think they are not allowed to dream big dreams. We have a sense of purpose found in our calling, but unfortunately it stops there. We never take the next step of contemplating where this might lead.

Just as you must pursue contentment, the paradox is that you also must pursue your dreams wholeheartedly. You should be scared of not fulfilling your dreams. God made the human heart to dream, and the dream that is most fulfilling of all is the one He has put into your heart. It's our job to steward that dream. How do we do that? Several ways:

Be careful what you say and to whom you say it. Other people may not be able to understand or appreciate what God has put into your heart. Look for trusted advisors who are for you...and will be both supportive and honest.

Check your ego at the door. Those with great dreams may also have great confidence they will accomplish them with God's help. Sometimes the "God's help" part gets lost, and they may be perceived as arrogant or overconfident. Your willingness to serve others, before and after you share your dream, will help ensure you aren't seen as an arrogant dreamer.

Practice both now and later. The lesson of "now and later" is simple: God expects your best effort now so you will be prepared for all that He plans to do in and through you later.

Trust God in the details. God may give a dream, but we usually do not know the details of how the dream is to be fulfilled. Getting too committed to our idea of the details can lead to frustration, and even to doubting the vision itself. There are always aspects God doesn't show us ahead of time!

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Another aspect of dreaming relates to dreaming with your first chair. Some say that is impossible; we say it is, although not easy. A first chair's dream for the organization is often big and broad, but may not answer all the *how* questions. This gives the second chair plenty of room to pursue their vision, so long as it is in line with the general direction given by the first chair. To do so you need to make sure you thoroughly understand the first chair's vision.

Once you know you understand the first chair's vision, you can begin to look for opportunities where your passion and gifts intersect with his vision. Many second chairs we spoke with were able to pursue their dreams within the structure of the organization and the boundaries of the first chair's dreams.

Chapter 10: Leaving the Second Chair

Almost all second chair leaders leave their position eventually, but not all leave well. One notable hindrance to the long-term success of second chair leaders is when they move prematurely or leave poorly. In doing so, they may miss valuable lessons that would serve them well. Some leave for a first chair role, some take a new second chair position, and others retire. Whatever you think the future may hold, you can benefit by reflecting on the timing and the process of leaving well.

That process begins before you arrive in your new position. Being honest about your skill set and getting clarity regarding expectations will help set you up for a positive ministry experience, which is a precursor to leaving well.

In terms of leaving, the first question is, "How do you know when you should stay or go?" There are several factors to take into consideration:

- How will leaving affect those around you? When it's right for you, it's right for everyone.

- Financial and quality of life factors are important (although you should try to work those out before considering leaving).
- Is your role continuing to offer growth, challenge, and opportunity?
- Do your skills still match the needs of the organization?

Some people are in too much of a hurry and leave too soon. They try to force a change so they can move to the next ministry challenge. Others hang on too long, out of fear of the unknown or getting comfortable with the status quo.

Sometimes leaving isn't your choice; you may be asked to exit. This is a reality for many second chair leaders. Whether it comes as a surprise or with some warning, whether it is fair or unjust, changing chairs at the insistence of someone else is rarely easy. Whether voluntary or not, the challenge is to leave well.

To leave well, try to maintain good relationships with your first chair and others on your team, even if you feel you've been treated unfairly. Do nothing to undermine them or the organization—you never know when this will come back to help or haunt you down the road. Don't burn your bridges. Ideally you should be able to leave with the blessing of the organization, including the first chair, and give them your blessing as well.

It is possible to prepare in advance for a change. Building and maintaining relationships is important—your network may hold the keys to your next step. There is also a financial dimension. Vocational ministry is not a high-paying profession, so it's important to do what you can to save for the future, even if it's only a small amount.

The final factor is mental. Knowing that a change is likely at some point allows you to make the most of your time. If you are committed to personal and spiritual growth, you can become a better leader, and leave a legacy behind.

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The Pastor's Perspective

Leading From the Second Chair was a book of particular interest to me. Several years ago I resigned a position as senior pastor due to an Absalom-type experience with my "second chair." It was a complete surprise and very painful. I found myself reading the material with an eye towards that history, and it was very enlightening.

It's very easy to read this book and think our second chairs should know all this stuff; the reality is that they don't. I wish I had had this book then, and gone over it with all my staff. Besides looking at the various tensions a second chair experiences, I think the authors do a great job in outlining how to handle each in a godly way. More than skill development, this is really a book about character, and I appreciated that.

Reading it as a first chair helped give me more perspective on the challenges those under me face, as well as ideas for how to help them prosper in their role. I really resonate with the deep-wide paradox they outline—that good second chair leaders have a specific area of competence as well as a church-wide perspective. I enjoy bringing people into the larger conversation of the church's vision and direction, so that was very encouraging.

Implicit in the book was the idea that a good first chair makes a big difference for a second chair. How I lead, whether I micromanage, how much authority I give away—those things can help someone prosper, or make them want to escape. I found myself thinking about different people on my team now and what they need from me in order to prosper. That alone has been worth the time in reading.

If you have a staff, or a group of strong lay leaders, I encourage you to read the summary together, or get the book and read it together. It may seem self-serving to some, as it strongly affirms the unique role of the first chair, but the benefits of talking about some things that usually aren't discussed will be invaluable.