



# Leaders BOOK SUMMARIES

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## Unusually Excellent

**The *Necessary Nine* Skills Required for the Practice of Great Leadership**

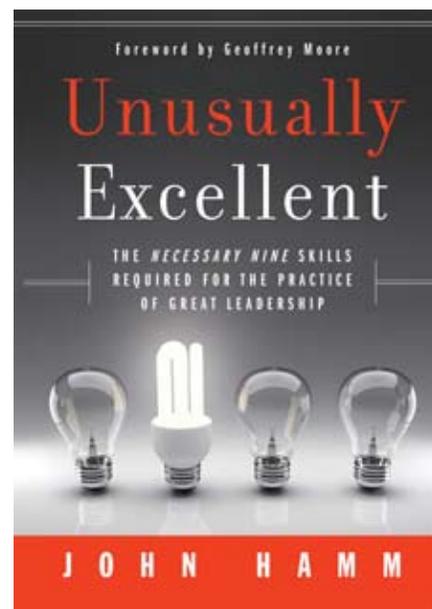
### THE SUMMARY

This is a book for leaders, not about them. It's about the practice of leadership over the long haul, not about theory. What I have learned during many years of work with leaders is that real practitioners of great leadership are successful by mastering a very specific set of practices and behaving according to those fundamentals in every situation and circumstance.

There are three major sections of this book: Credibility (flowing from character), Competence (which is a matter of skill), and Consequences (which is about our impact as leaders). Each section has three chapters, which we will turn to now.

### Chapter 1: Being Authentic—The Courage to Be Yourself

Being authentic—knowing who you really are, and holding true to yourself in the most difficult moments, is where leadership credibility starts. For some people this is easy, but for most it is more challenging. As leaders we often face situations that challenge us—situations where there is



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something at stake, for us and others. These circumstances challenge us to do the right things even when difficult, risky, or uncomfortable—when it is easiest to compromise who we are.

Knowing who we are at the core is a project of awareness, courageous introspection, and thoughtful reflection. The question we must ask is: *What informs and creates our capacity to lead with real influence?* Usually it is our own personal reflection—and it takes real courage to own the unvarnished truth about our lives and our past. Second, it comes from understanding how others perceive us as leaders.

It is crucial for leaders to “see who you are.” You must be willing to look at your life and reflect on it—how your life experiences have shaped you, and realize that this collection of factors is now a meaningful part of who you are. Too often the only thing we don’t make time for is listening to ourselves! (For some people, staying busy is the way they avoid any self-reflection). We need to search our memory for the life patterns that have become our routine.

One of the most important things for us to look at is our failures. Leaders are by nature success-oriented, yet every successful business leader I’ve ever known has failed at least once, usually in a big way. While mediocre leaders run from their failures, great leaders embrace them and carry the lessons with them into the future. If you don’t make peace with these events from your history, you will forever be reliving them, and you will subconsciously bring unfinished business into your future.

While you must know yourself in order to be authentic, it’s also important to know how others see you. To be authentic is to face the truth about yourself as seen by others, and that can be a soul-shattering experience in a job where you want to be admired. Never forget that others’ perceptions of you are their reality, regardless of whether you know their views or even agree with them. In reality, the gap between their reality and your self-image can be the cause of great frustration and even failure.

The only way to know other’s perceptions is to seek their feedback, which very few genuinely pursue. Even if you have the courage to see feedback, it’s difficult to get. Too many people want to stroke the leader’s ego; you must learn to seek feedback outside your “circle of admiration.” Most importantly, you have to make it completely safe for others to communicate their real experience of you. Minimize the emotion of the feedback and focus on performance and behavior. What do you *do* that works, and what do you *do* that *doesn’t* work?

Although this effort to gather honest, useful feedback is difficult, it separates Unusually Excellent leaders from the rest of the pack.

While we should be authentic 100% of the time, the reality is that most of us do not have a perfect track record on this topic. Sometimes we face situations that truly test our mettle, and make it easy to compromise who we are. I’ve noticed four basic reasons we compromise:

- We feel insecure and get scared.
- We know what to say, but don’t know *how* to say it.
- We take on other people’s feelings, or imagine what their feelings will be.
- We want to avoid the emotional pain of conflict.

The awful truth is that most of us compromise our authenticity in a myriad of small ways, more frequently than we’d want to admit. And each time we do it’s a paper cut to our self-respect. And the downstream impact of making these compromises can be devastating in a moment of stress. People begin to lose trust, and worse, it sets a precedent for this type of inauthentic behavior. Ultimately, it can trap a leader into an expectation or pattern of always behaving this way.

On the other hand, the rewards for leading an organization with authenticity are enormous. It is the first step of leadership greatness because it is the basis for

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the kind of trusting relationships with followers that are crucial for taking on demanding tasks that lead to notable accomplishments. It also serves to humanize and soften the positional power that accompanies the built-in authority of senior leadership.

Ironically, authenticity is one of the most difficult aspects of leadership for even the most experienced of leaders. It should be easy to be yourself all the time, but it isn't. Owning and embracing your personality, flaws, fears, passions, and values while still leading effectively and being a role model is no easy task.

## **Chapter 2: Being Trustworthy—The Consistency of Integrity**

We are exploring a logical progression of leadership development as we go through this book. First, Unusually Excellent leaders find the courage within to be authentic, which takes knowing themselves, accepting the disappointments of their past, and actively seeking feedback from their teams. Following this essential commitment is a promise to be trustworthy—to build a track record of honesty, fairness, and integrity that creates a leadership “equity” within their constituency. This is the currency they need when it becomes necessary to make unreasonable performance demands on their teams.

One of the challenges of building trust is understanding the operational environment. Leaders should assume that the starting condition for many people in an organization is a mildly to significantly negative experience of leadership—the damage stemming from having trusted those in power and subsequently being used, abused, disappointed, or hurt. They become skeptical and untrusting of leaders, and as leaders, we need to overcome this prejudice.

Trust is about safety, and feelings of confidence that follows from it. There are some very simple but powerful things every leader can do to increase his or her trust level with anyone. First, be honest—tell the

truth, and match your actions with your words. Second, be vulnerable—we trust people we believe are real, and also human. Finally, be fair. If you treat your followers fairly, and do so consistently, you will set a pattern of behavior for the entire organization.

These things build trust interpersonally, and interpersonal relationships are the building blocks for broader organizational trust. To move trust building from a 1:1 focus to the broader culture, there are some other things you can do:

- Do anything you can to reduce fear of irrational consequences. Talk out loud about your commitment to creating a safe place for the truth to live, and walk your talk.
- Have a bias for disclosure, and be transparent. All great enterprises have a free flow of data from top to bottom.
- Be clear. As crystal clear as you can, in all of your communications. Confusion creates anxiety.
- Don't take shortcuts. Every organization wants to succeed, so there is a constant pressure to let the ends justify the means. Don't abandon ethical or moral constraints for any reason.
- Model absolute integrity. Integrity isn't always easy to see when present, but when it is missing its absence is obvious.

A culture of trust is a culture of *truth*. As leaders we must build an insatiable demand for the unvarnished facts, honest feedback, and real information. Too often people evaluate facts as “good” or “bad” and shape their delivery accordingly. We must instill a confidence that leaders in the organization value the facts and truth, not whether they are good or bad, and that messengers are valued, not shot.

Developing a culture of truth could be the most frustrating and difficult thing you will ever do as a leader. It takes real courage to come clean with your mistakes and failures; that's why authenticity is the first step. It takes real guts to be your real self and admit your errors to the world. But that makes you trustworthy, and gives you the power to enforce a standard of integrity, and makes it safe for others to

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follow your example.

Developing a culture of trust has several advantages. Innovation becomes more common—innovation requires risk, and risk thrives when people feel safe in taking them—when they know they won't be punished for taking chances. When innovation flourishes, commitment increases—people become more engaged with what they are doing, and performance improves throughout the organization.

## **Chapter 3: Being Compelling—The Commitment to Winning**

Leaders must imagine and articulate a compelling future that enrolls others. To be willing to act of our own free will and choose to follow someone, we must experience something completely different, something more than the feeling of being “inspired” or “safe”—we must feel compelled. Almost any version of success requires committed action toward goals. And action requires teams of people aligned with a shared, bold vision. So what compels us?

- We followers are compelled by a cause. Leaders must paint a picture for those they wish to enroll—a vision of what *winning* will look like and how participants can contribute their talents in the pursuit of that vision.
- We are compelled by leaders. No one will sacrifice for a project if the leader hasn't made a full, clear, and public commitment to the cause. The best leaders are compelling to others because they have a deep, burning commitment that they can articulate in a way that makes others be part of the idea.
- We are compelled by “team.” Each of us wants to be part of something bigger than ourselves, while working with others.

You have to earn your followers at the outset of your organization or project, and you must value them every day following. No one is obliged to follow you!

The key question is: Why would your best and brightest be willing to follow you?

The best and brightest will follow you when you make the experience of being part of your effort more compelling, and emotionally rewarding, than any other experience. Practically, there is a 5-part strategy you can use to retain your best people:

1. Great leaders know how to *engage*. Engagement is about getting our attention, which often comes by listening to people.
2. Great leaders *enroll* people. All great leaders are great salespeople; this is so essential to enrollment that if you don't like to “sell” you should think long and hard about being a leader. You are always selling, even if you don't like to use that word. Ideas, proposals, recruiting talent, vision, plans—all require your ability to persuade others in a forthright and transparent way.
3. Leaders *energize* their troops. Their passion is contagious. Low energy leaders lead low-energy organizations.
4. Leaders *empower* their followers to assume the responsibility of being leaders as well—over others, and over themselves and their own careers.
5. Leaders generate *enthusiasm*. They have found the way to make their mission exciting to followers.

The best and brightest will tell you that they want two basic things to be happy in the long term—honest communication and meaningful challenge. Honest communication includes both the good and bad news; top performers want the truth, whether good or bad. They also want a challenge—it's not good news for them when their job gets easy (and boring). Challenge pushes high performers to struggle and learn in the course of getting things done.

## **Chapter 4: Leading People—Talent to Teams**

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A key part of every leader's job is building and leading teams. The first part of building a team is to get the best possible people on the team. There is no substitute for talent! Hiring great people is arguably the highest-leverage activity that leaders undertake, and many successful leaders spend half their time engaged in issues related to talent and team.

High performers set a different standard; they raise the bar for everyone. If you want to improve the performance of your team, start by hiring one person who performs with excellence. You'll soon see the performance of the whole team improve. Great leaders earn that title by having the confidence to hire people who are smarter than they are. They are secure enough in their role and their leadership to try to put the best possible team together, even when that means they aren't the smartest people in the room. Of course, the most talented job applicants in the world are a bad choice if they are not going to fit with you, your team, and the culture that you've built. If they don't fit, they are actually a handicap.

Hiring the right people comes even before developing strategy. The best people will help you develop the strategy. Many leaders think they need to develop strategy first, thinking that that will help them identify the right people. But the best people aren't attracted to a strategy; they are intrigued by a compelling vision and mission. So recruit to vision and mission, and let the best people develop strategy.

Once you find the right people and get them in place, there are five skills you will need to exercise in leading these great people.

1. Your biggest test as a leader is to motivate each member of that team to become fully committed to the success of your project. The way you do that is by being committed yourself, setting goals with your people, and rewarding them for meeting them.
2. Every team project is a crusade, and you as the leader need to get your people to join that crusade. Especially in the early days of an endeavor,

there are no guarantees of success, so this is the time when a compelling leader rises above the challenges and gets the team fully invested in the mission.

3. Hiring top talent drives higher standards; the job of leadership is to make sure those standards are met. The process of establishing standards begins with the hiring process. You need to clarify the minimum performance level that is acceptable and tell people up front.
4. Once you have the right people in place and have set the standards, you need to empower them. Empowerment is essentially the exercise of authority and power by divesting oneself of much of that authority and power. Giving people both responsibility and authority is the first step; establishing a feedback loop and performance coaching is the final step.

## **Chapter 5: Leading Strategy—Ideas to Plans**

It is often said that everything is created twice—once in the mind and once in the world. So to make a dream or a vision come true, we must first imagine it, but then we must make a plan—only then can we build it. Unusually Excellent leaders appreciate the power of a plan, and thrive on knowing their game plan at all times.

Developing strategy and plans is a process that effective leaders must master. They gain tremendous leverage by designing, creating, and blessing the planning process. The process must include the best people and the best ideas, and must foster collaborative thinking and constructive discussion.

The leader's primary job here is to set the vision and assemble the planning team. Some leaders tend to walk away after that, giving the team autonomy, and coming back after the team develops a plan. That's a mistake. The leader needs to be engaged throughout the process, to make sure it moves along and that the

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team stays realistic about time, resources, and goals. And of course, he needs to resolve disputes, break logjams, and motivate creativity.

## **A good-looking plan is:**

- Clear, complete, and simple.
- Compelling—it's a plan to win, with winning clearly defined.
- It aligns goals, structures, and resources.
- Outlines both what the organization will do and won't do.
- Guides the organization's actions and view of new opportunities.

One of the biggest challenges you will face is what happens after you have put a lot of time in and developed a great plan—and then something goes very, very wrong. Think *Apollo 13* and "Houston, we have a problem." What do you do now? It's easy to say "just change the plan" but that isn't an easy thing to do. By the time you have made the plan, you've spent a lot of time on it and are probably highly committed to it. And of course, you can't always be sure the threat or problem is as bad as it's being portrayed. There are an endless number of reasons *not* to change your plan. But there is one huge reason to do so: if you don't adapt and change, *you are going to lose*.

This is where you earn your pay as a leader. You need to stay cool, unsentimental, untied to the past—and decisive. Make the decisions you need to make, and then get to work executing them.

The ability to change a committed strategy when needed is clearly, 100% a matter of decisive, thoughtful, bold leadership. But there are times when the other side of courage is needed—the ability to stick with a strategy even when it looks suspect, if you believe in it deeply. When a *real* threat of failure emerges, you need to adjust. But in the face of lesser challenges, you need to be committed enough to hold the course, despite whatever pressures you may be facing.

## **Chapter 6: Leading Execution—Action to Results**

Execution is about results. At the end of the day, leaders are accountable for the results they produce. To believe anything else is to kid yourself and court failure. Execution is where the rubber meets the road. Execution isn't about hiring, developing the team, or making plans—it's about taking action. There is an energy to getting things done that is just a thrill.

Two factors make execution different from other essentials for the Unusually Excellent leader: measurement and feedback. Plans are based on probabilities; once you start working, you get actual data that tells you how you are doing. You aren't making your best guess any more. The other feature that makes execution different is the presence of time—the game clock. Each phase of execution is usually accompanied by time frames and deadlines. They drive the activity as well as creating built-in accountability points.

Leading execution is a 7x24x365 project. As the leader of the execution phase, your work is never done. Even as you coach the action, you will also be recruiting, training, and deploying new talent, maintaining communication with key constituents, and keeping an eye out for changes in the environment. This part of leading—making sure that things are *happening*, is enriching, stimulating—and exhausting. Your final challenge as the senior leader is to pace yourself, pick your battles, and at all costs, avoid burnout. You owe it to your people to be at the celebration at the end of the job.

It's hard to imagine enthusiasm having a down side, but it does, and it's called *overcommitment*. When things get exciting, people can take on more than they can accomplish...which can ultimately sabotage the whole project. Your job as a leader is to maintain discipline and order right up until success is achieved.

In a paper I wrote several years ago, I proposed the

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concept of “84 Great Things.” As a leader, if you have seven direct reports and can convince them to accomplish just three initiatives (important, but doable ones) per quarter, your subordinates will have completed 84 projects in support of your strategy. That would have a significant impact on your progress! And if they can get their direct reports to do the same, and it filters into the organization...the enterprise would become unbelievably efficient, competent, and accomplished. They would spend an incredible percentage of the total organizational energy on the right things.

After making sure your people are focused on the right goals, the next important thing a leader needs to do is make sure the right things are being measured. It’s especially important that those factors that most correlate with winning are measured. Measuring in this way can assist you in focusing attention on the right activities. When you have the right metrics in place, an enormous amount of energy will flow toward accomplishing the goals being tracked, and that leaves leaders free to do real leadership work.

In leading execution, the final focus for the leader is maintaining a winner’s mindset. For any team, the only acceptable result should be winning, or getting results. But you’d be amazed at how many well-led, talented teams get off track. It happens subtly; over time failure is tolerated, excuses are accepted, and the focus shifts to “failing elegantly” rather than winning. When you stop believing you can win, you start devoting your energy to how best to lose. As soon as there is a hint of that mindset creeping in, the leader needs to step up and get the team refocused and re-energized.

## **Chapter 7: A Leader’s Communication—Open, Honest Dialogue**

When we accept a role called *leader*, we implicitly agree to be the chief communicator for the organization. That’s not a responsibility we have a choice about. Communication is to an organization like water

is to a garden; it keeps things vital, growing, and healthy. The ability of leaders to communicate effectively is perhaps the highest leverage activity in their set of responsibilities. When they do it well, things work, smoothly and effectively.

As followers, we have a basic set of questions we expect to be answered on a regular basis. Here are some of those questions:

- What are we doing? (Vision & Mission)
- Why are we doing it? (Purpose and Goals)
- What’s the plan to win? (Strategy)
- How are we doing? (Health of the business)
- What’s my part? (Expectations)
- How am I doing? (Feedback)

Keeping your people informed is one of your central responsibilities as a leader; it should be scheduled into your calendar. A shortage of information leads to anxiety and fear, unless you stop it in its tracks by getting the right information out. Good communication builds trust, and enables teams to perform at an optimal level. That means it cannot be seen as a side job or add-on; it has to be central in a leader’s thinking and planning.

We tend to think of leaders as being men and women of action. However, if you look over their entire careers, great leaders can be more accurately characterized as men and women of communication. As the chief communicator of the organization, the leader has three basic tasks:

- Align the interests, energy, and commitment of the team.
- Reduce fear, confusion, and anxiety.
- Instill confidence and trust, while rallying support and contributions.

Obviously I consider leadership to be important. In fact, I consider communication to be so important that all leaders should consider themselves to *be the message*—that is, to live out their careers in congruence with the beliefs, morals, and truths embedded in

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their communication.

It's also important to remember that communication goes both ways. Unusually Excellent leaders are good listeners, and they listen with a purpose. They listen intently, without interrupting, judging, or fixing blame; they listen past the message to the speaker's interests, talents, and values. In other words, they listen to *understand*.

## Chapter 8: A Leader's Decision-Making—Values-Based Choices

The final judgment of our leadership expertise will depend, more than anything else, on the quality of the decisions we have made, in aggregate, over the course of our careers as leaders. Leading decision-making is basically leading the conversation that improves the quality of those decisions. Your primary job as a leader is not to make most of the decisions that arise every day, but to lead in such a way that the people who do make them make better decisions than they would alone.

Decision-making is both an art and science, and there is a structure to consider, as well as a number of principles to keep in mind. The following is the sequence of thinking to use as you approach this competency:

- *What?* What exactly are we deciding?
- *When?* When must this decision be made?
- *Who?* Who makes the decision?
- *How?* How will this decision be made?

In thinking about the "what" there are several types of decisions we have to make, each with their own unique challenges. First, decisions can be classified as either *simple* or *complex*. The degree of complexity is usually determined by how much data is needed to make a good decision (and how much of that data you actually have). Second, decisions can also be characterized as *easy* or *difficult*. Easy decisions typically have either an obvious solution or few real con-

sequences. Those decisions should be pushed down to the right people and not made at the top. Finally, there are *pleasant* and *unpleasant* decisions. This is where you know what to do, but it just isn't going to be much fun. Making public admissions of failure, layoffs, announcing poor results, etc. are never pleasant; announcing successes, giving out promotions, etc. are.

When does this decision need to be made? The challenge is to not wait until you have all the information (which never happens), but also not act prematurely.

Who should make this decision? Unless you create a culture that rewards or punishes otherwise, the natural tendency of humans is to shirk making decisions that can be pushed up to someone else. The real question is "*who decides who decides?*" And that person's goal should be to get the person with the right skill, experience, and history to make the best decision.

Decisions demand to be made. Unmade decisions stop the action. The real problem lies in decision paralysis. Not making a decision is almost always worse than making a bad decision. Bad decisions (as long as they aren't catastrophic) at least keep the organization moving, which means they can be rectified by changing course. But no decision at all just stops things, and strips your organization of momentum.

Keep in mind that a decision not communicated is often the equivalent of a decision unmade. Decisions made mean a choice about what to do next. That decision must be communicated to the people who are affected, need to know, or must take some action. The communication of decisions is the final opportunity to botch it—or nail it.

Finally, as leader you need to recognize that the most difficult and most unpleasant decisions will end up in your lap. When that happens, you need to stay on top of your emotions, good or bad, and not let them unduly impact your decisions. Over the course of your career, every decision you make should reflect your

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deepest values—not merely expediency, your mood at the time, or short-term advantage.

## **Chapter 9: A Leader's Impact—The Transfer of Influence from Leader to Follower**

Every leader leaves a legacy. Of all the issues related to legacy, none is more complex, elusive, and unpredictable than your work with people—the relationships, transactions, conversations, conflicts, shared victories, and all the rest. These are the memories that have the most juice for most leaders and most followers.

Even though you can't fully know the ultimate impact of your leadership, you can learn to imagine or even predict what your legacy will be based on how you are leading today. To a certain degree you can plan your legacy by becoming more aware of how you are leading. I don't mean you should obsess about your future or micromanage everything around you; I do mean that thinking about your legacy will give you perspective, and enable you to think long-term.

A leader's legacy is composed of three parts. The two most obvious ones are through our decisions and our successes. The good thing about these two factors is that ultimately, they are empirical—they are measurable. Time will tell if your decisions were good ones or not.

The third, less obvious factor that will affect your legacy is reputation. This is what people think and will say about you—and there is almost nothing you can do about it. They will be influenced by four things:

1. Reward—Were they acknowledged for their commitment and accomplishments?
2. Respect—Were they appreciated, privately, for their service and sacrifice?
3. Award—Were they credited appropriately for their contributions?
4. Education—Did they learn valuable things from

being part of the team?

Reputation is not the specifics of one person's experience, but the broadly held collection of memories, stories, and beliefs that is the product of scores of points of view. These perspectives ultimately coalesce to create a publicly held opinion of a leader's mark on the world and the people of his time.

To lead well today is to lead with a vision of and a respect for how you will be judged in time. That perspective will make you think about the implications of even the smaller decisions you will face. It will help you to think about those who follow you—to value them, and to take into account the impact on them of what you do. Having a "legacy perspective" is a powerful leadership tool. And even more importantly, with time and practice, it will even enable you to look inside your own heart.

## **The Pastor's Perspective**

*Unusually Excellent* is a challenging book. John Hamm's focus is on how to become a great leader—not just competent or good.

I appreciated his emphasis on character: Being true to yourself, even when the pressure is on; living out your deepest values, even when there is tremendous pressure to compromise. Thinking back over the years, most of my biggest leadership mistakes came when I didn't live out my deepest values. Not in a sinful way, but in a way that compromised, and ultimately undercut the culture I wanted to build.

Here's a simple example. I have a high value on encouragement and affirmation, and one way we expressed that on our staff was to do "birthday blessings." We took time to intentionally bless people—identify what we saw in them, call out their potential, affirm their strengths, etc. It was one practical way we tried to sow that practice into the church. At one point we hired a staff person who said he wasn't

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comfortable with that (on his own birthday). Because I didn't want him to feel awkward or pressured, I said ok, and we didn't continue the practice. That was a major mistake. By trying to be a "nice guy" I let go of a deeply held value, which came back to bite me years later (but that's a whole 'nother story).

I was also struck by his comments on energy—that a great leader energizes those around him/her. And that a low-energy leader will lead a low-energy organization. That prompted some soul-searching! I think I energize those around me inconsistently—it's definitely an area I can grow in.

I thought his insights into a leader's environment were very applicable to the church. The idea that people start off with a negative bias towards leaders, due to past bad experiences, is really true. I see it all the time. It used to be that pastors were given the benefit of the doubt regarding character, leadership, etc; not so true anymore, and we can't assume that it is. That makes leadership more challenging.

Finally, I think I understand his comments on decision-making better than I ever have before. First, that a bad decision is better than no decision. My bias has been to procrastinate on decisions rather than make a wrong one; it's taken me years to realize the cost of that bias—or should I say fear? But now I've learned that movement is generally better than inaction. I also appreciated his insight about the importance of communicating decisions—not communicating a decision is the same as not making it. It's easy to relax after making decisions and somehow think people will just know about them, rather than thinking through: Who needs to know about this? Who will it affect? Who needs to act on this?

He is clearly writing for a business audience, so I had to mentally translate much of the material to a church setting. But his principles clearly apply, and embracing them will help anyone become a better leader.