

Leading Without Power
9 Paths Toward Non-Coercive Ministry Leadership

By Mark Oestreicher



THE YOUTH CARTEL

Leading Without Power

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INTRODUCTION

ORIGIN (AND A SEMANTIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENT)

I like power.

As I've grown older, I long to see this inclination decrease and be replaced by humility and other traits that are more in alignment with Jesus. And I've seen God do a wonderful work of transformation in my life over the last two decades.

Part of the tension is that the exercising of power has—while often creating problems and doing harm—brought plenty of benefits to my life.

I have a friend who traveled as a youth speaker and was known for his energetic, passionate, and even manic presentation style. Then he was diagnosed as bipolar

and put on meds. The meds were absolutely needed and helped him survive. But they also shaved off his powerful manic moments, which he'd come to rely on when on stage speaking to teenagers. He deeply struggled with how to re-imagine his presentation style if he couldn't tap into that manic frenzy that people responded to so positively.

I understand that. I long to be a leader who influences people toward the Kingdom of God, and I increasingly long to do that without the exercising of coercive or manipulative power. But those tools in my leadership tool belt—the coercive and manipulative set—used to work really well for me (most of the time).

I got promoted (many times) because of the powerful way I led.

I was given meaningful responsibilities.

I was praised.

At one church, I was hired as the junior high pastor and two months later, promoted to oversee junior high through college ministry. And when that church's senior pastor imploded four months later, I was selected as one of a small team of this large church's staff to give interim leadership to the church and input to the

church board.

The two men leading this effort sat me down and told me very specifically why they were choosing me for this responsibility and honor (these are actual words): “You are a powerful leader. And your lack of mercy is the strength of your leadership.”

Needless to say, I had some lessons to unlearn in future years.

About 20 years ago now, I began to see the problems with this style of leadership. Primarily this was due to being increasingly uncomfortable with how much damage I occasionally wrought in the lives of people I cared about, even when the overall ministry results would have been considered a win. I sought out mentors to help me grow. I read books. I prayed. I asked forgiveness.

Of course, this wasn't an overnight change, and it's unquestionably an ongoing project. But I can look back over these past two decades and see significant growth: the old me giving way to a new, transformed me.

I still like power. But I can now easily recognize that natural inclination (and the accompanying feelings, motivations, and not-yet-taken actions). And I can

choose a different path, with different choices. I can lead with influence but not coercion or manipulation.

THE NEXUS OF THIS BOOK

Early in this process of change, I picked up a book by noted leadership guru Max De Pree. I had read one of his earlier excellent books on leadership, either *Leadership Jazz* or *Leadership Is an Art* (both still worthy reads), and was instantly intrigued by the title of this small third book: *Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community*.¹

Honestly, it's not De Pree's best book, more of a collection of short essays on leadership in the nonprofit world, where "customers" aren't paying for a product and much of the work is done through volunteers. There are some helpful nuggets in the book, to be sure. But the title itself is what messed with my head. And for 20 years now, I've been rolling those three words around, experimenting and playing with what they might look like.

That's what lead to this small book. With apologies (and thanks) to De Pree, I'm just using the same title, since they are the words that have guided me through years of developing this material, even though the content you'll read here is 100% different from De

Pree's and of my own creation (as is the subtitle).

I'd be very happy if the title of any of my books results in people ruminating on an idea for 20 years.

A SEMANTIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I'll just get this on the table right now: One could easily argue that this entire book is a semantic game, at least when connected with its fairly bold title. Leadership of *any sort* has power inextricably woven into it. In a sense, there can be no such thing as "leading without power." If leadership is actually occurring, power plays a role, even if that leadership is unintentional.

My 18-year-old son texted me from college. He asked if I had heard the new release by a musician in a genre my son knows I normally don't choose. In a sense, it was an absurd question, and he had to have known the answer would be no. Whether he knew he was doing this or not, he was certainly hoping I would listen to the album and decide I liked it enough to buy it, which (since my son and I share an iTunes account) would mean he would have the album also.

Music is a connection point for my son and me and has provided many memories (particularly of attending concerts together) and conversations. Our musical

tastes overlap at roughly 80%, and I enjoy our dialogue about the 20% as much as I enjoy the dialogue about the overlap.

I texted him back, though, and told him that I'd listened to a few songs on the album and, while I respected the work, didn't think it was likely that I would purchase it. He responded with "Cool," and that was that.

Except: I gave it a second listen. And a third and fourth. And the album really grew on me. There was genius in it and a level of creativity and genre-rejection that was uncommon.

So, I bought it and ended up listening to it nonstop, while I worked, for the next four days.

I chose this example here because of its inconsequential nature. Max didn't set out to lead me. At best, he wanted to share with me something he found interesting. At worst, he was hoping I'd buy the album so he didn't have to.

But in that experience, Max was absolutely leading me. And, I would be flat-out denying the definition of power if I tried to explain away this exchange saying that Max's leadership of me wasn't imbedded with power. There's no leadership without power. That is true when

it's obvious. And that is true when it's not obvious, or when the exercising of leadership is unintentional.

With that said, allow me a semantic maneuver. While what I've just written about power is true, most of us don't think of power (particularly when connected to leadership) with that framing. Most of us think of power in leadership to mean *coercive, top-down, authoritative power*.

This sort of power, I suggest (with no research or footnotes), is the dominant practice of leadership in most organizational leadership (business, civic/political, nonprofit, church). It's what we're accustomed to. It's what we expect.

Even if organizational leadership is good and pure and lovely (and not overly coercive or manipulative), it's still normally imbued with assumptions about the leader's position, authority, and ability to say yes or no.

This is the reality—our collective understanding of the function of leadership as hierarchical and authoritative—that I hope to side-swipe by suggesting that ministry leadership should be marked by leading *without* power.

And it's this understanding of the function of leadership

that I hope to see continually decreasing in my own leadership.