***Leading from the Second Chair***

**By Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson (Jossey-Bass, 2005)**

***A Book Review by Rev. Don Eastman – 2009, updated 2022***

Second chair leadership in churches is a term that has become familiar, especially in large congregations, over the past decade. The 2005 book, *Leading from the Second Chair*, by Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson defines second chair leadership as, “A person in a subordinate role who has opportunity to influence others and add value throughout the organization.”

While the authors say that second chair leadership is not limited to the second person in an organizational hierarchy – other leaders can be considered “second chair” – much of the discussion in this book centers on the actual second person in a subordinate leadership role. The context of this book, one in a series of the Leadership Network, is very large churches (more than 800 average worship attendance) and mega-churches (more than 1800.)

Having spent much of my professional career in both secular and religious “second chair” roles, I want to applaud the insights and wisdom of these authors. From a practical standpoint, this is useful information for pastors, staff members, and volunteers in smaller churches too. It is most applicable to those leaders –staff or volunteer – who report directly to the person in the first chair leadership role.

*Leading from the Second Chair* is organized around three apparent paradoxes: subordinate-leader; deep-wide; and commitment-dreaming. The authors call these paradoxes “apparent” because “these pairs do not represent either-or choices.” I would suggest that these pairs might also be seen as polarities. For helpful information on engaging polarities see *Managing Polarities in Congregations*, by Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson

The *subordinate-leader paradox* means that as a subordinate you are expected to follow the lead of your senior leader. You are expected to serve with an attitude of humility and gladness. As a leader you expect and are expected to be an initiator. You are expected to see and act on things that help the organization function better. The tension in this paradox is the line between leading and insubordination. The key to successfully engaging this paradox is a foundation of trust; leading on the basis of a healthy relationship of mutual trust with the senior leader.

The *deep-wide paradox* means that a second chair leader needs to see deep into the details and wide in the total perspective of the church. You need to see various ministries in the context of the larger organization as well as engaging the more detailed questions of “why?” and “what if?” Being deep and wide is the essence of how second chair leaders spend their time. It involves four practices:

1. Be a pulse taker: Knowing what others are thinking and feeling is valuable information for both the second and first chair leaders.
2. Be a vision amplifier: While the first chair leader is the primary vision caster, the second chair leader has the role and opportunities to repeat, clarify, and reinforce the vision.
3. Be a leader multiplier: A second chair leadership priority is to identify and develop other leaders who can help achieve the vision.
4. Be a gap-filler: If there is no other leader that can fulfill a critical role, the second chair leader needs be prepared to step in and address the need.

The *commitment – dreaming paradox* means the need to align your dreams and calling with the current reality of your second chair leadership role. Contentment in the second chair is your choice to stay, grow, and excel for a season, regardless of current circumstances. At the same time, dream cultivation plays a significant role in your leadership journey. In this position, you are not limited to fulfilling the dreams of the first chair leader. You are called to be loyal and supportive, but this does not negate your sense of calling. Dream stewardship is a process of both “now” and “later.” Also, it is helpful to discover ways you can accomplish your dreams within the dreams of your first chair leader.

*Leading from the Second Chair* concludes with a helpful chapter on leaving this position in a church. The authors note that “the process of leaving well begins before you arrive in a second chair position.” It is important to be sure that a specific second chair leadership position is right for you in the first place. Is it a matter of circumstance more than choice or of convenience more than calling? Are you clear about your strengths and weakness? Is the position a good fit for your particular talents? The right choice is foundational to a good tenure.

Advice on leaving your leadership position includes leaving as a better leader because you have continued to learn and grow; leaving a legacy because you have helped the church grow stronger through your service; and leaving the congregation, including the first chair leader, with your blessings.

**Helpful Books**

Beaumont, Susan, *Inside the Large Congregation (*Alban Institute, 2011*).* This is an excellent book on five leadership systems in larger congregations (above 400 in average worship attendance.) See especially the chapter on “Clergy Leadership Roles.” See also her book co-authored with Gil Rendle, *When Moses Meets Aaron: Staffing and Supervision in Large Congregations*. (Alban Institute, 2007)

Katzenbach, Jon R., and Smith, Douglas K., *The Wisdom of Teams* (New York: Harper Business, 1993) As well as challenging much conventional wisdom about teams, the book is full of advice for effective teams. See also their sequel, *The Discipline of Teams* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001), which adds insights for implementing team disciplines.

Gaede, Beth Ann, ed. *Size Transitions in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001). This book includes a collection of writings on church size transition by thirteen authors. It is a useful primer on the dynamics of church size.

Weese, Carolyn and Crabtree, J. Russell, *The Elephant in the Board Room: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004). Written by two consultants associated with the Leadership Network, this is a book about intentional succession plans for pastoral transitions. It presents a helpful construct on how the leadership style of a pastor influences the culture of a congregation.

Carroll, Jackson W., *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006). This book presents the results of a large research project on the state of pastoral leadership in the USA. This research at Duke University is focused on excellence in the ministry of pastors.