By Jeff Myers, Ph.D.

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Passing the Baton to the Next Generation

A leadership crisis is looming in America. The current generation of leaders is not adequately passing the baton of leadership to the next generation. Let’s review the facts:

- *The baton is not being passed in business.* Five hundred of the largest companies can expect to lose 50 percent of their senior management by 2010 and 40% of companies don’t have a leadership succession plan.¹
- *The baton is not being passed in government.* Governing magazine reports that as baby boomers retire, the knowledge and experience necessary to conduct government is going out the door with them.²
- *The baton is not being passed in the church.* The number of adults who do not attend church in America has nearly doubled since 1991, and only 51% of Protestant pastors and just 8% of Protestant parishioners possess a biblical worldview.³

Of course, every crisis is also an opportunity, and this one plays in our favor. If our schools become nerve centers of leader development we could prepare a generation of Christ-centered leaders who could significantly influence every sphere of society.

My goal in this article, and in the work our team is doing at Passing the Baton International, is to face the brutal facts by (1) understanding why this generation has failed to prepare leaders and (2) discerning how to create change by turning to the ancient principles of discipleship demonstrated by Jesus during his earthly ministry.

**Why This Crisis Exists**

The current leadership vacuum is not due to a lack of information. A Google search for “leadership” yields a page count of 246,000,000. Do the zeroes indicate that the Google servers got tired of counting? There has never been such a glut of leadership training advice and strategy.

I’ve been tracking the coming leadership crisis for several years and at the risk of oversimplification, I believe there are two reasons we’re facing it:

1. **We’ve focused on leadership rather than leader development.** To train the next generation of leaders we must stop focusing on “leadership” and start focusing on “leader development.” “Leadership” is about how to get followers. “Leader development” is about turning your followers into initiative-taking, problem-solving influencers.

Certainly we want our faculty/staff and students to know how to follow. No organization can survive if everyone goes his own way. Leadership, though, involves solving problems for which there is no instruction manual.
Harvard’s leadership guru Ronald Heifetz describes leadership as mobilizing people—groups, organizations, societies—to address the tough problems that lie in the space between known problems and unknown solutions. This involves character qualities such as empathy, discernment and fortitude which must be learned through experience rather than in a book.

This is a complete reversal of the way most people think about the issue. Look up “leadership” on Amazon.com and you’ll references to 326,881 books. Look up “leader development” and you’ll find references in only 3,178 books—less than one percent of the total.

Leaders who are not leader developers are a ticking time bomb. Eventually they’ll leave a void. How will we fill it?

2. **When we have focused on leader development, we’ve gone about it the wrong way.** There are thousands of college classes on leadership and billions are spent on leadership training. Yet most companies, government, schools and churches still struggle with leadership.

Why? My opinion is that too many would-be leader developers ignore the chasm between *knowing about* leadership and actually *leading*. There are many ways to teach people *about* leadership, but only one way they can actually learn to lead: life-on-life discipleship.

The life of Christ should be our model of leader development. After all, in three years of earthly ministry Jesus took 12 ordinary men, equipped them to change the world, and they did it. Scripture tells us that Jesus did essentially three things differently. I’ll examine each of those three things briefly and offer ways to verbalize them to your faculty/staff and students.

**Three Steps to Prepare Leaders at Any Level**

The Gospel of Mark, chapter three, verses 13 to 15, tells us how Jesus trained leaders:

> “And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.”

**1. Jesus “called to him those whom he desired.”** It’s up to today’s leaders to step back from their to-do list, observe the people around them, and impart a life-giving blessing. Here’s what it might sound like:

**Students:**

- “I listened to your class presentation and can see that you have what it takes to influence others and create change. I would like to help you develop that ability.”
- “Has anyone ever told you that you have the gift of mercy? May I share with you the influence I believe you could have with that gift?”

**Faculty/Staff:**
“If you come to our school we want to help you experience life-long growth as a teacher, a leader and a person.”
“I see my job as helping you cultivate your gifts by coaching you and providing regular accountability and feedback.”

2. Jesus “appointed twelve…so that they might be with him.” Gunther Krallman estimated that Jesus walked with his disciples full-time for more than a year of his three year ministry. If we were to follow this calculus, we would invest one-third of our time in leader development. Here’s what “walking with” sounds like:

Students:

- “I’m going to be hosting a small group study about leadership every week just before school. I’d like for you to join.”
- “I know you’re interested in medicine. I’m going to have lunch with a local doctor. Why don’t you write down three or four questions you’d like to ask and come along?”

Faculty/Staff:

- “I’m reading a book on leadership that I think would be of benefit to you. Would you take time to read it? Maybe we could get together to talk about it.”
- “I’m going to be part of a training event that I think would be of interest to you. Would you like to come with me?”

3. Jesus’ goal was to “send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.”

Emerging leaders must have the opportunity to be “pushed out of the nest”—to succeed, and fail, at new things—under the guidance of someone interested in their growth. Here are some ways to articulate this:

Students:

- “I’ve learned about a leadership training program this summer. Would you consider attending and debriefing with me about whether our school should get more involved?”
- “You’ve seen me explain the vision of our school to lots of people. I’d like to help you develop a presentation so that potential parents and donors can hear a students’ perspective.”

Faculty/Staff:

- “A new classical school has started up a few hours from here and they need help developing their math curriculum. Would you be willing to go advise them for two days?”
- “I see that you have administrative gifts and I’d like to start meeting with you. No pressure—I just think it would be stimulating for us to learn by going over case studies of situations that principals commonly face.”
A New Learning Outcome

What I’m suggesting, and what I’ll be talking about at the conference this summer, is this: leader development should be a key objective of our schools—not as another subject to teach, but as an end to which our whole organization is directed.

It takes a lot of time, but I think it’s worth it. We are not primarily interested in training students who will blindly do what their government and employer tell them to. We want students who will decisively engage the world biblically. This is an issue of leader development.

Most school heads don’t think in terms of developing the leadership skill of their staff and faculty members. One administrator asked, “What if we invest all of this time and effort in training leaders and they leave to go someplace else?” To which mentoring expert Tim Elmore replied, “What if you don’t invest in them and they stay?”

Fifty years from now historians will judge us by whether we managed to articulate our principles clearly, pass them on to subsequent generations and sustain a growing movement. We’re running around the curve in the track. The next generation is waiting, hand outstretched, ready to receive the baton. What are we going to pass to them?

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