



*The Leadership Ellipse:
Shaping How We Lead by
Who We Are*
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An Interview with Bob Fryling, Author of *The Leadership Ellipse*

When did you first decide to write a book on leadership?

This book really began more than 20 years ago when I first identified the conflict between my senior leadership expectations and my spiritual convictions. I had read dozens of books on leadership. I had attended valuable leadership seminars and was even teaching leadership.

Concurrently I was hungry for a deeper relationship with God and read widely in the area of spiritual formation. I went on retreats and practiced various spiritual disciplines.

However, I was frustrated that these two worlds of organizational leadership and personal spiritual formation not only didn't seem to connect, but they were almost in opposition to each other. I felt like the proverbial man with his head in the freezer and his feet in the oven but on the average was just the right temperature!

So this book is a reflection on my journey to integrate these two dimensions of what spiritual organizational leadership might look like if they were connected.

Can you explain what you mean by a “leadership ellipse”?

An ellipse is a geometrical figure that is defined by two distinct but interrelated focal points. The leadership ellipse is defined by the two focal points of the leader's inner life of the soul and the leader's outer life of leadership. When these two defining elements of a leader's identity are not well connected there is often great inner personal stress as well as external conflict. When they are working well together they describe a much sought after life of leadership integrity.

You originally wanted to call this book *The Peacock's Prayer*. What does a peacock have to do with leadership?

Everything! Peacocks, like leaders, can attract external admiration while simultaneously communicating a strutting arrogance. I saw this dramatically expressed in a poem called “The Peacock” by Carmen Bernos DeGasztold. The final stanza of this poem is the prayerful cry of a peacock, “Lord, let a day come, a heavenly day, when my inner and outer selves will be reconciled in perfect harmony.” I think that is a wonderful prayer for leaders to pray as well.

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Bob Fryling, Publisher at InterVarsity Press and Vice President of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

The business world, especially publishing, has been turned on its head over the past months. Some leaders might argue they don't have time to do the things you advocate in your book, like taking a Sabbath day, journaling or having an open-door policy in the office.

Time is the most valuable resource a leader has to spend because it is so limited. But we as human beings are also limited and function best when we live within our limits. I believe that God as our Creator has given us both commands and wisdom on how best to “use our time” that includes both appropriate rest and relational responsiveness in addition to plain hard work. Productivity and success are not just affected by the quantity of work but by the quality of one's life.

You are the publisher at IVP and also serve on the board of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship; your days must be extremely busy, yet you call for leaders to “renew their minds.” Why is this so important, and how can leaders fit this into a busy life?

Jesus taught that the greatest commandment included the exhortation to love God with our minds. Later on in the New Testament the early church was encouraged to pursue spiritual transformation by “the renewal of their minds.” I don't believe that this is an option for leaders today but a necessity for a vibrant spiritual life that connects to an effective life of leadership. Fortunately reading and thinking can be done in so many ways and at so many times that mental renewal can happen continuously if a leader is committed to it.

What do you mean by a “dancing heart,” and how does this attitude contribute to good leadership?

I got this phrase from a class called “Quiet Heart, Dancing Heart.” The teaching of this class was that we first need to have a quiet and settled heart before we can actively and meaningfully serve others. Otherwise we are like glasses half filled with water trying to spill over! Yet just being quiet is not sufficient for a leader who is called to lead and serve others. We need to engage others with the disciplined joy exhibited in dancing. So a dancing heart is one that communicates the emotional desire to lead and embrace others to successfully do something together that is both beautiful and enjoyable.

You devote an entire chapter to loneliness. Why do leaders tend to be lonely, and how can they deal with this problem?

There is an old saying that “it is lonely at the top,” and this is true for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. Usually it is used to refer to “positional distance” that is actually developed by many followers as a coping mechanism to not lose their identity in the identity of the leader. However, I also know that leaders experience loneliness through overwork and even boredom in their jobs. Because most organizational leaders have a lot of public obligations and are used to a fast-paced life, it is possible to be bored and busy at the same

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time. The antidote for this kind of loneliness is to be proactive in spiritually “belonging” to God, to belong to others in a nonleadership role, and to have a healthy sense of belonging or calling in the world.

IVP has consistently been named one of the Best Christian Workplaces by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Do you feel this is due in part to the pursuit of shalom in the office?

Yes. Shalom is a Hebrew word meaning “the way things ought to be.” Employees have great instincts for the way things ought to be in an office in terms of communication, personal involvement and relational dynamics. Articulating and collectively practicing these values makes work far more satisfying than just doing a job.

You are very honest about some of the professional failures you have experienced as a leader. Why did you decide to include those in the book?

Because we learn more from our failures than from our successes, and all leaders fail all of the time. In fact, it is our fear of failure and the fear of talking about it that often leads to autocratic and others types of dysfunctional behavior. I have found that talking about failure can be spiritually liberating and deepen our trust relationships with one another.

How does practicing gratitude help you to be a more effective leader?

Gratitude is an energizing emotion and is at the core of good leadership. Everyone needs encouragement to do well, and leaders model that practice. But for encouragement and gratitude to be effective, they cannot be flattery or just a perfunctory skill. Authentic gratitude has to come from a truly grateful person. Yet leaders themselves are often depleted and worn down by criticisms and self-protection and don’t always feel grateful. So it is the spiritual inner life that has to be the wellspring of gratitude that translates into effective leadership.