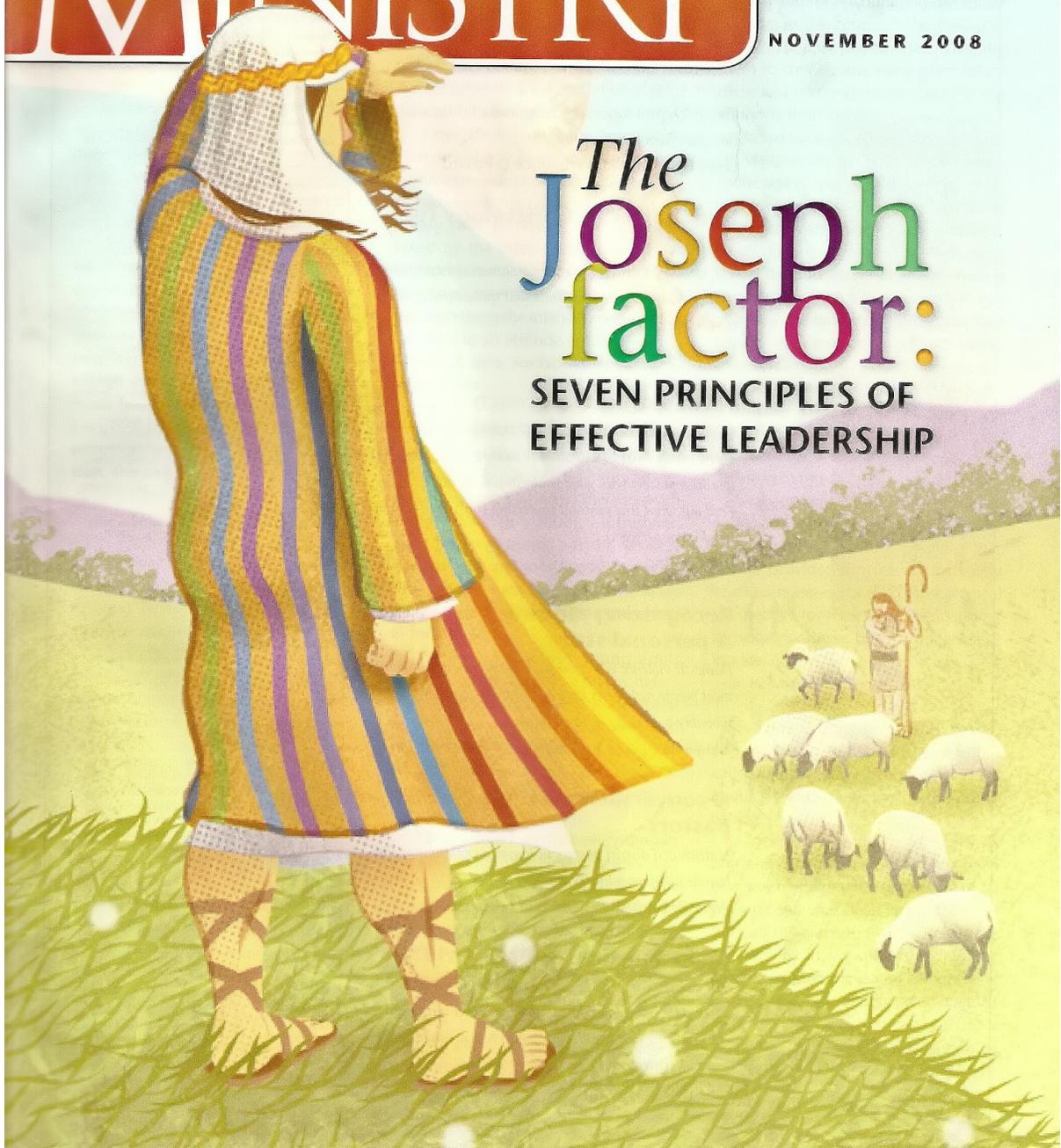


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SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF
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The Joseph factor: Seven principles of effective leadership

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Every age has had its own approach to the study and practice of leadership. For us as Christian leaders, our approach should begin with the Bible. The Word of God has more to offer on the subject of leadership than one would imagine. One way to focus on the biblical concept of leadership consists of studying the lives of its great men and women.

This article features a study on the leadership lessons we may glean from the life of Joseph. Together they form what we may call the *Joseph factor*. The Joseph factor will cluster seven essential leadership skills and engage them with today's research on leadership. First, however, we should lay out our assumptions regarding how Scripture will be handled in our study.

Assumptions

Our first assumption highlights the primary source for teaching and learning, for Christian leadership centers in Scripture, the Written Word of God. However, the Bible cannot be classified as a textbook on leadership. On the other hand, in our high view of Scripture, the Bible stands as the recorded history of God's activities toward, and commitment to, the redemption of the entire human family. Thus, personalities (some of whom are leaders) are mentioned in Scripture to the extent that they impinge or affect the trajectory of God's mission to the human family. Some characters occupy center stage; others appear as supporting cast. But a careful analysis of those

who occupy center stage reveals the principles present, precepts embraced, tactics employed, and lessons articulated that are instructive for modern leaders.

The second assumption emphasizes the greatest example of leadership in Scripture—Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God. His commitment to *agape* love and self-renouncing service sets the bar for Christian leaders (see Phil. 2:1–5). His passion for His mission, His commitment to His followers, His patient process of disciple making (modern mentoring), and His empowerment and equipping of His followers for effectiveness demonstrate the nature of authentic, other-centered servant leadership. This second assumption, therefore, frames a template for Christian leadership that goes beyond the inspirational value of the many characters who step on and off the stage of Scripture. Ultimately, Christian leadership will be normed against the example of Jesus Christ witnessed to in the New Testament.

The third assumption behind this article points out that much of what leaders can learn from the study of leadership has already taken place over the last several decades. There have been substantial advances in research on leadership theory and practice.¹ Further, like other branches of human inquiry, we evaluate the utility of these studies by their alignment to the Written and Living Word.

We now turn to the subject of our study—Joseph. But first a definition: the “Joseph factor” includes a set of beliefs, attitudes, and skills demonstrated by Joseph that transform persons from professional followers into high-impact leaders. The Joseph factor outlines a package of seven secrets that energizes leadership.

Choice

The first and most striking element of Joseph's leadership journey shows that nothing in his family origins could have predicted that he would have become a highly effective leader. Consider all the “negatives” in his background: Joseph was the child of Jacob, a polygamist who had four wives that rivaled each other; Joseph had ten stepbrothers born to three very competitive mothers; he and his younger brother shared the same mother, and Joseph's grandfather Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah, who was not Jacob's first choice. Additional negatives include two other mothers in the home who were surrogate moms, Joseph lost his mother when he was young, and Joseph's father favored him because he was the son of his old age and the first child from Jacob's first love. But that only brought Joseph bitterness and

hatred from his brothers. Despite such a background that today would have yielded an alcoholic, a drug addict, a psychotic, or a narcissistic personality disorder, Joseph rose to remarkable heights in leadership. At 30 years of age, Joseph became the prime minister of Egypt (see Gen. 41:39–46).

What made the difference? Joseph exercised the gift of choice. He *chose* a different path than the one that might have been dictated by his dysfunctional home. Research into the backgrounds of corporate leaders reveals that survivors of serious adversity, rather than become permanently dispirited, become great leaders when they “used the experience as a defining moment.” Challenges made them stronger.²

Vision

Contemplate vision as the second concept in the Joseph factor—the dream that guides leaders and followers to their desired future state. Joseph’s dream, recorded in Genesis 37:5–9, outlined God’s plan for his life. Joseph knew that he was called to lead. His dream provided the compass that oriented his life through its breathtaking ups and downs. This shows exactly how leadership vision functions. Vision keeps the flame of hope alive in the hearts and minds of both leaders and followers. In fact, without vision, there can be no leadership.

This secret of Joseph’s leadership finds corroboration in modern leadership literature. Numerous leaders have attested to the centrality of an overarching vision as the driver of organizational performance: James Stillman, Citicorp’s president from 1891 to 1909 and chairman from 1909 to 1918, in order to create a great national bank, hired people who shared his own vision and entrepreneurial spirit; Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, envisioned building a low-cost retail organization; Paul Galvin, founder of Motorola, dreamed of building a great and lasting company; and Walt Disney wanted to make people happy and to bring joy to children and to shape the imaginative lives of children. What distinguishes these leaders is not that they had a personal vision but that they were organizational visionaries;³

they envisioned and built enduring companies. Visions must challenge, inspire, and align energies in a common direction and play a “key role in designing the future by serving as the front end of a strategy formulation process.”⁴

Consider the ecclesiastic side of our organization (churches, conferences, etc.). Though the policies are designed to facilitate solidarity in function, very often those policies are saddled by conformity rather than visionary leadership. This state prevails in many places because policies not only express organizational values and culture, they create the boundaries of the organization. Organizational culture, in turn, forms the parameters for acceptable leadership and follower function. These parameters of conformity explain why some leaders within the ecclesiastical branch of our organization are frequently met with (and often discouraged by) skepticism. Other more sanguine leaders catch this organizational message and quickly become play-it-safe managers rather than bold, visionary leaders.

Much of our organizational energy goes into supervision rather than empowerment for vision. Modern research shows that leaders must protect the voices of those who are willing and able to exercise leadership from the bottom up. Those engaged in doing the work of the organization are able to “see” inconsistencies and other organizational threats that might not be apparent to executive leadership, and those committed voices should be encouraged and protected. Additionally, as it was in the case of Martin Luther King Jr., every leader should be able to say regarding their assignment, “I have a dream.” Vision will pull the organization into its future. While no branch of the organization can claim perfection, the ecclesiastical side of our organization must engage in intraorganizational learning—such as we note in the health ministry (hospitals, clinics, etc.) of our organization.

Endurance

The unexpected twists and turns in Joseph’s life—from the pit, to the prison, to the palace—are undergirded with one constant: endurance. While the first 30

years of Joseph’s life are significant for their pain and their pinnacles, Joseph lived for 110 years. This means that Joseph lived faithfully, while prospering, for 80 years after his deliverance from prison (Gen. 50:22). Leaders are called to take the high road for the long haul.

Leadership endurance can best be seen in the face of adversity. Leadership is hard work! (1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 2:3). Leaders often face discouragement, rejection, ridicule, resentment, misrepresentation, and a host of other challenges. However, Joseph’s history demonstrates that rejection of the dreamer did not kill his dream. Some leaders have trouble recovering from rejection, but not Joseph. His character and vision resulted in fortitude. Modern leadership shows that the hardy survivors of adversity, like Joseph, persisted despite internal or external challenges to their companies. R. H. Macy failed in retailing seven times before the success of his New York store. After Henry Ford II fired Lee Iacocca, Iacocca could have remained despondent, but instead he accepted the challenge of leading the bankrupt Chrysler Corporation. Iacocca’s remarkable leadership of the Chrysler Corporation took it beyond bankruptcy to financial success. Bill Boeing’s first airplane failed so badly that he had to enter the furniture business to keep the business afloat. Endurance requires hardiness to face challenges to become stronger.

Self-management

Ponder self-management as the third ingredient in the Joseph factor. A description of Joseph includes his being “well-built and handsome” (Gen. 39:6, NIV). We have all heard of leaders, both male and female, who have exploited their own gift of allure, whether physical or political, to the injury of themselves, their families, and their organization. If you as a leader have been blessed with physical attractiveness, remember that you should utilize, as a part of self-management, your beauty to honor God and advance His kingdom. Attractiveness, as a part of our influence capital, must be deployed only to advance others; and self-management is

the ability to subordinate our impulses to the demands of our calling.

Potiphar's wife assaulted Joseph at the point of his self-management. When she attempted to seduce Joseph, he could have exploited his attractiveness. But again, in the Joseph cycle, we see his character shining through. Joseph did not succumb. He responded, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9, NKJV). Joseph did not want to behave in an immoral manner, even though it would have been very easy to rationalize. A moral leader has to behave in moral and ethical ways by doing the right thing, even if no one looks on and there exists no way of getting caught. Joseph demonstrates a spiritual maturity, along with the moral character, to move to a greater sphere of leadership.

Self-management describes the leader's ability to control their own thinking, emotions, and behavior. Effective leaders decide to manage themselves while managing other work-related responsibilities. Peter F. Drucker asserted that, like history's great achievers, a manager must "learn to manage" himself.⁵ Management of self, for Drucker, includes self-development and control. The effective leader knows their strengths, weaknesses, and limitations, and how they perform and learn. For example, do I produce results as a decision maker or as an adviser? Do I perform well under stress, or do I need a highly structured and predictable environment? Central to the management need that Drucker identifies is the requirement for self-reflection to understand personality, attitudes, character, and, therefore, behavior preferences.



Diligence

Take into account the fourth ingredient of the Joseph factor—diligence, defined as the leader's conscientious commitment to duty, responsibility, or assignment. Diligence expresses itself in following through, and forms the foundation of leadership credibility. Promises made are promises kept. Projects are brought to closure. Communication completes its loop. Few things are more demoralizing to enthusiastic followers than leaders who do not follow through on projects and promises. Lee Iacocca, remarkable for his leadership during the first half of his tenure at Chrysler, strayed in the second half due to his "lack of discipline to stay within the arenas in which Chrysler could be the best." Instead, he moved to a "binge of highly undisciplined diversifications."⁶

Diligent leaders maximize the opportunities they have, rather than the ones they wish they had. Joseph could have said to himself, *I am destined to rule. It is not my calling to supervise operations in an Egyptian prison.* But wherever Joseph could make himself useful, he did. He maximized the opportunity before him, rather than believing that the grass would be greener in some other pasture. Even as he was on his way to Egypt as a slave, "He would serve the Lord with undivided heart; he would meet the trials of his lot with fortitude and perform every duty with fidelity."⁷ God blessed Potiphar's house because Joseph was there. If the organization is not being blessed because you and I are there, we need to stop and take inventory. Wherever Joseph went, blessings followed him. Even in prison, Joseph managed the warden's assignments so diligently that the warden expanded Joseph's portfolio. The prison was blessed. As a result, Joseph was entrusted with all the responsibilities associated with the prison (see Gen. 39:22; Prov. 6:6–11).

Discernment

Discernment, the next gem in the Joseph factor, denotes the leader's ability to identify and read patterns behind apparently random events or actions. Spiritual leaders especially discern the movement of God in their

life circumstances. At the reunion scene of Genesis 45:5–8, Joseph's testimony forms a classic statement on providential discernment: " 'God sent me ahead of you. . . . It was not you who sent me here, but God' " (NIV). Until this point in the story, the reader remains under the singular impression that Joseph was sold. But Joseph, now as a 40-year-old vice pharaoh, invokes the incredible Hebrew term *shalach*—the term that comes from the primitive root "to send." Joseph connects the dots of his past experience and asserts that "God sent me. Like an apostle, or a missionary, or an ambassador, God sent me ahead of you!"

Just because Joseph articulates this gift of discernment at the high point of the Joseph narrative, one should not conclude that Joseph did not realize this pattern some time earlier. In fact, he realized it nine years earlier. At the point he was brought before the pharaoh to interpret the dream of the lean and the fat cows (Gen. 41:1–10), Joseph was able to see the pattern in his life. Then the original portion of the Genesis 39 vision was fulfilled. However, the fulfillment of the second element of the vision, his family's offer of obeisance, materialized some nine years later.

Christian leaders are called to not only discern but also to trace the hand of God, to understand God's will and providence, to "hear" the voice of God, and to "see" the outworkings of God. Discernment is a gift from God!

Compassion

The seventh and the last ingredient of the Joseph factor in leadership is compassion—the leader's ability to extend grace to the follower who has failed. Such grace can be transformative. Researchers have found that such an attitude by wronged persons liberates both the offended and the offender. Jesus restored Peter (John 21:15–19). Paul expressed his desire to see Mark whom the apostle earlier deemed unfit for ministry (2 Tim. 4:11). Effective leaders practice the art of forgetting, forgiving, and supporting those who previously failed them. Joseph's brothers had wronged him in the most horrible

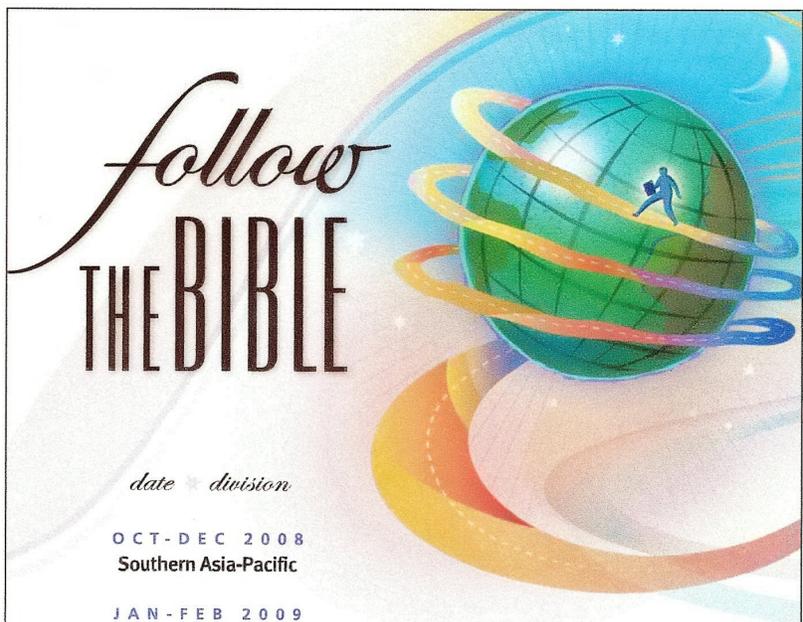
way imaginable. Joseph could have seized the opportunity to get even and he could have justified it, but Joseph had no interest in vengeance. Genesis 41:51 points to the healing of memories. Joseph's first child was born while he was in Egypt. He named him *Manasseh*—meaning "God caused me to forget all my suffering." The second indicator that Joseph resolved his traumatic experiences comes in verse 52 where he named his second son *Ephraim*—"God made me fruitful."

Conclusion

The Joseph factor points to seven effective characteristics of true leadership—qualities desired by organizations today. More so, they ought to be the characteristics that define our own leadership style as Christian pastors and leaders. ■

- 1 See, for example, Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006); James M. Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001); Paul Hersey, Kenneth H. Blanchard, and Dewey E. Johnson, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Leading Human Resources*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000); James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).
- 2 See Ann Kaiser Stearns, *Coming Back: Rebuilding Lives After Crisis and Loss* (New York: Ballantine, 1988), 294; Al Siebert, *The Survivor Personality* (New York: Perigee Books, 1996); Collins, 82; Kouzes and Posner, 182.
- 3 James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, "Clock Building, Not Time Telling," in *Business Leadership: A Jossey-Bass Reader* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 373–403.
- 4 Burt Nanus, "Where Tomorrow Begins: Finding the Right Vision," in *Business Leadership: A Jossey-Bass Reader* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 359.
- 5 Peter F. Drucker, "Managing Oneself," *Harvard Business Review* (March/April 1999), 65–74.
- 6 Collins, *Good to Great*, 132.
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1913), 214.

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