

FOREWORD BY GREG L. HAWKINS
Executive Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church



LEADING FROM THE SECOND CHAIR

**Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your Role,
and Realizing Your Dreams**

Mike Bonem & Roger Patterson

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A LEADERSHIP  NETWORK PUBLICATION

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*To our wives, Bonnie and Julee, who have loved us as we are
and have believed in our dreams*

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FOREWORD

His name was Fred.

For more than three years, we met almost every Thursday for lunch and then would take a walk. As we walked, I would debrief the week and describe the problems I was working on. We always had plenty to talk about, and many times our conversations got rather animated.

Actually, I was the animated one. Fred listened patiently as I explored the edges of my thoughts and feelings. He offered counsel and insights into our organization and its leader. He helped me understand how to apply my unique set of skills to the situations I faced. He was my coach, friend, and lifeline.

I have told Fred repeatedly that a main reason I have been able to serve as executive pastor of Willow Creek for almost ten years now is because he coached me during my very first years in the job. I absolutely know I would not have made it without his help.

Fred was effective because he had spent years as a first chair leader in the marketplace *and* he had served effectively for five years as a second chair leader in our church. He understood Willow Creek and its culture. He also understood and had worked for our senior pastor, Bill Hybels. (It didn't hurt that Fred was, and still is, an incredibly fun person to be with.)

Over the years I have regularly gotten calls and e-mails from executive pastors asking for my advice on how to be more effective in the role. They have asked me what books or seminars have helped me over the years. I come up empty every time. I don't know of anything that addresses the complexities and tensions that are unique to the second

chair role. What I want to tell them is, “Get a Fred!” But folks like Fred are hard to come by.

This is why it is so exciting for me to introduce you to Mike Bonem, Roger Patterson, and *Leading from the Second Chair*.

Drawing on their years of second chair experience, as well as the experience of other skilled second chair leaders, Mike and Roger have captured the essence of the second chair role. *It is about leading and managing your way through a set of paradoxes.* The first time Mike shared the three key paradoxes with me, I immediately knew they were on to something; it rang so true to my experience.

I remember the day I figured out that Bill Hybels wanted me to boldly lead like a first chair leader, not just “manage” the church staff. Yet I had to do so knowing he could step in at any time and reverse a decision I had just made. This was counterintuitive to everything I had ever read about leadership. This is the paradox of subordinate-leader.

As executive pastor, I am expected to know something about everything going on at Willow Creek, and at the same time to provide hands-on leadership of a multimillion-dollar capital campaign, while offering world-class coaching to the high school pastor and a dozen other ministry leaders. The pressure is immense. This is the paradox of deep-wide.

Finally, there have been days when I dreamed intensely about the future of my church. Dreams so real that I am sure God would want them to come alive right away. Yet ultimately my dreams are just one voice in a larger community, under someone else’s leadership. I have had to learn to trust God and wait on Him patiently. This is the paradox of contentment-dreaming.

The insights from Mike and Roger are unique, and I believe they will benefit you or anyone in a second chair role, regardless of the size of your church or organization.

But beyond offering lots of practical advice, I believe the book has something else equally valuable. It offers hope, because, you see, the second chair role can be very lonely and there are many days you wish someone would just tell you that you're not crazy. After reading Mike and Roger's story, along with the stories of other second chair leaders, I don't feel quite so alone. I feel understood, and I have more hope.

I pray that all of you can find a Fred in your life as you navigate your second chair role. But in the meantime, it gives me great joy to invite you to journey with Mike and Roger in *Leading from the Second Chair*.

Greg L. Hawkins

Executive Pastor

Willow Creek Community Church

PREFACE

When we began a monthly business outreach lunch series two years ago, we (coauthors Mike and Roger) knew we wanted to combine lessons in leadership with biblical principles. To be honest, the first several months were hit-or-miss. As we evaluated one of our misses, we realized we were teaching first chair leadership concepts to a group of middle managers. Shifting our approach to address their needs, we titled the series “Leading from the Second Chair.” Their immediate receptiveness told us we had struck a chord.

As we continued to develop the material, we could see that this topic interested many people in the church and the marketplace. Their interest was not due to a lack of material on the broad subject of leadership. Many outstanding resources address the general question, “How can I be a more effective leader?” What they wanted was to have something that addressed their unique challenges. They knew from experience that second chair leadership was different. They wanted to know how to navigate the obstacles they faced in this subordinate role and how to capitalize on the opportunities that seemed just beyond their grasp.

In truth, some of the positive feedback to our original presentations was simply due to our acknowledgment of these issues. We found an audience that wanted validation of their concerns and challenges and that wanted to look forward optimistically to the future. It is in this spirit that we offer this work. It is intended to be a practical and encouraging book for those who faithfully serve in a variety of second chair roles in churches, judicatories, and businesses. You do not need another “how to be a leader” book. You want to improve your leadership with resources

that recognize how your role is different from that of senior pastor, executive director, bishop, or CEO. We hope you will find the affirmation and instruction that you need as you read the stories and principles in these pages.

Written from the Second Chair

A book about leading from the second chair should be written by second chair leaders. We both serve in second chair roles at West University Baptist Church, Roger as the associate pastor and Mike as the minister of discipleship. Roger has also served as the student minister of this congregation and another. Mike's prior experience offers a different perspective on the second chair. He has been a second chair leader in business, a consultant to businesses and congregations, and a lay leader in the congregations where he was a member. In our formal and informal education and all of our volunteer and vocational experiences, we have sought to improve as leaders. More important, we have endeavored to serve God's Kingdom by offering our best to the churches in which He has placed us.

West University Baptist is a seventy-seven-year-old congregation in an affluent neighborhood near the center of Houston. Like most churches with a long history, West University has experienced many seasons of blessing and growth, but it has also had to deal with periods of decline and crisis. From 1980 to 1999, West University was in a period of steady decline, with average weekend attendance falling by 40 percent. Many factors contributed to this slow erosion of a once-vibrant congregation.

In 1996, the congregation called Barry Landrum as its senior pastor. Roger came on board in 1997 as the student minister. Mike and his family joined the church in 1998, and

he joined the staff in 2001 after leaving his business consulting career. During the five years from 1999 to 2004, God richly blessed West University Baptist and the downward trend reversed. Average attendance has now increased by 94 percent, and many other signs of congregational health are evident. We do not say this to take credit for the “success” of the church; we give God alone glory for the quantitative results and, more important, the changed lives. Nor are we saying that we were the only second chair leaders at West University during these years. The church has been faithfully served by our colleagues on the staff and by a host of lay leaders, too many to name. In fact, this broad group of second chair leaders underscores one of the themes of this book. When a group of leaders is willing to be used by God and is unified in following His vision, exciting things happen.

The ideas and recommendations in this book grow out of our own experiences as second chair leaders, as fellow travelers and learners in the journey of leadership. The simplistic snapshot of West University Baptist presented here may leave the impression that we have enjoyed unqualified success and an easy journey. There have been many joyous moments and ample victories, and we feel blessed to work in such a positive environment.

But there have also been many struggles. We had “great ideas” that failed—some that never got off the ground because they were not supported by the first chair, and others that did get off the ground and should not have. There were times when we bridled at the restraints imposed by our positions. At other times, we stepped too close to the line where constructive dissent becomes insubordination. We had to negotiate (and renegotiate) working arrangements, apologize for missteps, and accept solutions that we thought were less-than-ideal. Leading from the

second chair has not been easy for us, but it has still been one of the most rewarding seasons of our lives.

Beyond Our Experiences

The lessons and principles embodied in this book are not limited to our experiences. We are indebted to a number of second chair leaders who shared their stories—both positive and negative—as we developed this project. Our conversation with more than a dozen individuals, all of whom have significant second chair experience, added depth and richness to our work. Steve Ahlquist, Tom Billings, Kelli Caskey, Gary Ferbet, Dena Harrison, Greg Hawkins, Ric Hodgin, Bob Johnson, Dian Kidd, Kim Miller, Preston Mitchell, Robert Moore, Dan Reiland, Warren Schuh, Glenn Smith, Robin Smith, and Geoff Surratt have all learned valuable lessons in the second chair and were glad to pass them along to others. More information on these second chair leaders is in the back of this book.

As you will see in our definition, a second chair leader does not have to fit a particular mold or hold a particular title, and this was certainly true for the individuals with whom we spoke. Beyond the common denominator of the second chair, they had little in common in their backgrounds and roles. They served in small and large churches, judicatories, and other organizations, and they covered the spectrum of denominations. They were men and women. Some saw the second chair as their lifelong calling, while others saw it as a step on their way to a first chair role. Some were not sure where God might lead them. Many had titles that clearly indicated their second chair role, but not all did.

Our outside interviews did more than furnish interesting stories. They confirmed the challenges of second chair leadership, and they validated our framework. Being in the

second chair is the ultimate leadership paradox. It is the paradox of being a leader and a subordinate, having a deep role and a wide one, and being content with the present while continuing to dream about the future. Some may say it is impossible to do all these things, but we found that effective second chair leaders embrace these extremes. Those who thrive in this role, whether for a season or for the long run, learn to live with the tension that this creates. It is the tensions and paradoxes of second chair leadership that we explore in this book.

A Word to First Chairs

This book is written with second chair leaders in mind, but it will also be a useful tool for those in the first chair. If you are the senior pastor or executive director or are in some other top role, we hope you will gain new insights into your second chairs' attitudes and actions. Most of you sat in a second chair role at one time, but you may have forgotten what it was like. Perhaps the ideas presented on these pages will start a dialogue between the two of you, a dialogue that will benefit you, the second chair, and your ministry as a whole.

Each paradox concludes with a special section called "A Word to First Chairs." Here we apply the principles of the paradox to the role of the first chair. Some first chairs are missing the benefit and support of a capable second chair because they are hesitant to allow the latter to lead. For each paradox, you can take steps that will be of great benefit for your subordinates. But before you take these steps, you need to decide if you are willing for your direct reports to be true leaders, if you are ready to release them to the challenge at hand. Your second chairs are living with the tensions of the paradoxes. We want to encourage you to help them thrive, rather than just survive, in their role.

• • •

Tension and paradox are not necessarily bad. They are a reality we live with. They force us to stretch and reexamine our assumptions. Once we recognize them, they can propel us to a place of greater success. If you are in the second chair, you have not been called to a place of comfort; you have been called to a place of leadership. As you learn and grow in this experience, you have the opportunity to become more effective as a leader and to be used by God in a powerful way. We hope that you will be encouraged today to be the leader that God has called you to be, and that much Kingdom fruit will result from your faithful commitment.

CHAPTER 1

LIVING IN THE PARADOXES

The second chair is a complex and challenging role to fill, but you probably already know that. You understand the tension of leadership and the high-stakes game that goes along with it. Since you have picked up this book, you know that serving in the second chair involves seasons of frustration and stress as you try to follow your senior leader. Because of your position and your natural temperament, you cannot be passive about the future of your church or organization. At the same time, your position seems to limit your ability to change things for the better. This book is written for you, if you are looking for hope and direction as you live with this sense of urgency and passion.

This is not just another leadership book. At times, we have felt great exhilaration in discovering resources that helped shape our vision of a preferred future or offered a solution to a burdensome problem. We have been frequent consumers of books, tapes, and conferences as a means of improving our leadership. Yet we have often felt frustration or discouragement after using these resources because they were not aimed at us. Their focus was the senior leader of the organization, the person who has the freedom and relative autonomy that comes with this top position. In the second chair, the amount of change you can initiate is limited because you are not the vision caster, the lead leader.

You may have speculated, in moments of frustration or dreaming, that things would be different if you could have the reins, just for a season. You are sure that your

communication style would be more effective, your handling of staff issues would shine, and bold new initiatives would be launched. You know that you would make the tough calls that need to be made, and at the same time you would win the world with your charisma. At some level, you may be chomping at the bit to move into the role of the first chair. It is only natural that you feel this way; it is not a bad reflection on you or the leader that you follow. As one who is called to lead, it is simply the reality of how God has wired you.

Or you may never have imagined yourself in the first chair. You have neither the desire to make the tough calls nor the charisma to charm the masses. But you envision your organization becoming much more effective, much different than it is currently, and accomplishing far more as a result. You know that you hold a key position, and you want to be part of a great, enduring enterprise that is fulfilling its God-given calling and potential.

Whichever scenario you identify with, the good news is this resource has been written just for you! We want you to understand that you are not alone. God desires to use this experience in the second chair as a transforming season in your life. As you read this book, we hope you become aware that God has a specific role for you to play, and incredible potential for you to realize. This role challenges your ego, buffers your speech, and keeps you anchored in your calling. It is a place of growth and development, a place of real contribution, and a place that tests your commitment. God wants your best wherever you are, no matter the circumstances, no matter the comfort level of your chair. To put it bluntly, the chair in which you sit is not a La-Z-Boy! It is often the most uncomfortable chair in the room, but it can be deeply fulfilling.

What Is a Second Chair Leader?

A second chair leader is *a person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization*. This is a definition that we will break down and reinforce as we seek ways to put it into practice. Think about it: even though you are not in the first chair, your actions can change the entire organization for the better. Of course, you may struggle with the idea of subordination, or think it impossible to have an impact throughout the organization. Each term in this definition has multiple shades of meaning, but the second chair leaders with whom we spoke consistently demonstrated this picture.

Second chair leadership is unique because it is not strictly based on the power and authority of positional leadership. A person who is able to succeed by influencing others is a more effective leader than one who issues edicts to be obeyed. Leading from the second chair requires this kind of pure leadership because it seeks to improve the entire organization, from the first chair to the last, without the formal authority of being the first chair leader. Of course, most second chair leaders do have some degree of positional authority. Those who thrive, however, find much of their success through influence and relationships. They bring a new perspective to the powerful concept of servant leadership.

You do not have to be the number two person in an organizational hierarchy to be a second chair leader. In fact, our definition can include anyone who is not the lead leader. Every organization has a perceived pecking order. In reality, your position may be tenth chair, or seventh, or third. In nearly any position on the totem pole, you are a *potential* second chair leader—a person in a subordinate role who has

an opportunity to influence others and add value throughout the organization. You alone can choose how to develop and cultivate your influence for the benefit of the congregation. Regardless of where you are on the leadership development journey, there is room to grow and learn.

The distinction between hierarchical position on an organization chart and true second chair leadership is illustrated in the executive branch of the federal government. It is obvious that the president is the first chair leader, and the vice president has the official second chair position. In many administrations, however, the vice president's actual role is relatively insignificant. Which positions in the cabinet and the office of the president are the key second chair roles? Who has the most influence in setting and directing the national political agenda?

It depends. It changes from one administration to the next. Some of this is driven by pressing national issues—the economy, domestic security, international affairs—but the bigger determinant is the individual's relationship with the first chair (the president) and the individual's ability to work with others to influence the broader political landscape. This is the true picture of second chair leadership. A trusted chief of staff or press secretary can be a powerful figure, even if his or her official responsibilities and departmental budget seem to be much less than those of the secretaries of the treasury or defense.

Of course, even the first chair leader answers to someone: a board, the elders, shareholders, a bishop, the voters. Ultimately, in Christ's Kingdom, we are all in the second chair, submitting to Christ as the head. But for those who do not occupy the top position, the ways to lead effectively are distinctly different. These differences can be summarized in three apparent paradoxes that second chair leaders encounter throughout their careers.

Three Paradoxes in the Second Chair

A second chair leader's unique role involves a special set of tensions. Any leadership position has challenges that stretch the individual, but these general stresses are not our focus. The unique tensions for a second chair arise because the expectations he encounters appear to be incompatible, or even contradictory. He is expected to be a bold initiator and faithful follower, a creative thinker and detailed implementer. The ongoing challenge is to do a variety of tasks and do them well. Being called upon to wear so many hats can be perplexing and stressful. We describe these tensions as the three apparent paradoxes of second chair leadership: *subordinate-leader*, *deep-wide*, and *contentment-dreaming*. They are paradoxes because at first glance they seem to be mutually exclusive. But our contention is that these pairs do not represent either-or choices. Rather, effective second chair leaders need to live within each paradox and master both ends of the spectrum. Some may experience the tension of one paradox more intensely than another, but all three paradoxes are woven into the fabric of being a second chair leader.

In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras contrast the “Tyranny of the *or*” with the “Genius of the *and*.” They explain that businesses trapped by either-or thinking are not nearly as successful as those that insist on finding a way to achieve *both-and* (Collins and Porras, 1994). Some companies decide they must choose between producing a high-quality product or one that is low-cost, but those that find a way to do both have long-term success. Some church leaders believe they must focus on evangelism or on discipleship, on reaching new members or on caring for the current flock. The ones that have enduring impact for the

Kingdom discover a way to accomplish both-and. In the same way, effective second chair leaders discover the genius of the *and* in each of the three paradoxes.

The first is the subordinate-leader paradox. For many of us, our mental model of leadership involves having complete freedom to set direction and determine actions for ourselves and the organization without any “interference” from a supervisor. From this perspective, any submission to another person is less leaderlike. Effective second chair leaders do not have this sort of zero-sum view of organizational responsibility. They know that two heads are better than one, and that the first chair is not an adversary. They are able to lead without being at the top of the pyramid. Most important, they understand that their authority and effectiveness as a second chair stem from a healthy, subordinate relationship with their first chair.

The second challenge is abbreviated as the deep-wide paradox. Second chair leaders have specific roles that are narrower and deeper in scope than those of the first chair, yet they need to have a broad, organizationwide perspective. Some who struggle with this paradox resent the restrictions of their role as being too narrow, or they see the more detailed dirty work as being beneath them. At the other extreme, some excel at their specific tasks but fail to see the big picture. If an issue arises, they always see it from the viewpoint of how it affects their ministry. Narrow leaders may have trouble negotiating the informal relational networks that are leveraged by second chairs who seek to have a broader impact on the organization. Effective second chair leaders develop the skills to be both deep and wide.

The final paradox is described by the tension of contentment-dreaming. Being the second chair does not mean giving up on individual or corporate dreams. But a dream cannot be allowed to become shortsighted ambition, nor can it be positioned in competition with the plans of the