

PRIMAL LEADERSHIP: REALIZING THE POWER OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

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Primal Leadership was written for the purpose of articulating and advancing a new concept of leadership. The authors suggest that the "fundamental task of leaders. . . is to prime good feeling in those they lead, (because) the primal job of leadership is emotional" (be).

This is a very provocative study for theological education, because it challenges the paradigm of leadership development inherent in most curricula. What follows is a summary of basic points, using the authors' own words and close paraphrases, in order to make clear the logic of their conclusions.

I. Primal Leadership and Emotional Intelligence

The glue that holds people together in a team, and that connects people to an organization, is the emotional resonance they feel with and for each other (20). The key to making primal leadership work to everyone's advantage lies in the leadership competencies of *emotional intelligence* . . .

(6). These competencies are (see pages 39 and 254ff):

- 1) PERSONAL COMPETENCE: Managing ourselves
 - a. Self Awareness – includes Emotional Self-awareness, Accurate Self-assessment, and Self-confidence
 - b. Self-Management – includes Emotional Self-control, Transparency, Adaptability, Achievement, Initiative, and Optimism.
- 2) SOCIAL COMPETENCE: Managing relationships
 - a. Social Awareness – includes Empathy, Organizational Awareness, and Service.
 - b. Relationship Management – includes Inspirational Leadership, Influence, Developing Others, Change Catalyst, Conflict Management, and Teamwork and Collaboration.

II. Leaders are Made Not Born

Emotional intelligence involves circuitry that runs between the brain's executive centers in the prefrontal lobes and the brain's limbic system, which governs feeling, impulses, and drives. Skills based in the limbic areas, research shows, are best learned through motivation, extended practice, and feedback. The neo-cortex grasps concepts quickly, placing them within an expanding network of associations and comprehension (102).

The limbic brain, on the other hand, is a much slower learner-particularly when the challenge is to relearn deeply ingrained habits. This difference matters immensely when trying to improve leadership skills and habits that are learned early in life. Reeducating the emotional brain for leadership learning, therefore, requires a different model from what works for the thinking brain: it needs lots of practice and repetition (103).

The crux of leadership development that works is *self-directed learning*: intentionally developing or strengthening an aspect of who you are or who you want to be, or both (109). Self directed learning involves five discoveries, each representing a discontinuity. This kind of learning is recursive: the steps do not unfold in a smooth, orderly way, but rather follow a sequence, with each step demanding different amounts of time and effort (109).

III. The Five Discoveries Motivating Learning for Leadership

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| <i>The first discovery:</i> | My ideal self - Who do I want to be? |
| <i>The second discovery:</i> | My real self -Who am I?
What are my strengths and gaps? |
| <i>The third discovery:</i> | My learning agenda - How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps? |
| <i>The fourth discovery:</i> | Experimenting with and practicing new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery. |
| <i>The fifth discovery:</i> | Developing supportive and trusting relationships that make change possible. |

Ideally, the progression occurs through a discontinuity—a moment of discovery—that provokes not just awareness, but also a sense of urgency (111-112).

In order to discover the key personal capabilities that contributed to outstanding leadership, the authors analyzed nearly five-hundred competence models in government, business, and not-for-profit organizations (including a religious institution). They were interested in the role that three categories of capabilities played in good leadership: technical skills, cognitive abilities, and emotional intelligence. What they discovered is stunning: "our rule of thumb holds that EI (emotional intelligence) contributes 80 to 90 percent of the competencies that distinguish outstanding from average leaders—and sometimes more" (251). My guess is that most professional graduate schools, including theological schools, assume just the reverse of this.

Primal Leadership has thirty-seven pages of notes documenting claims with many references to empirical research studies. The book also has narrative accounts of personal change and transformation from the use of the five discoveries self-motivating learning process, and follows with accounts of organizational change in the second half of the book.

This study is a provocative challenge for theological educators interested in preparing leaders for the church in general and for congregations in particular. A couple of questions come to mind:

1) Are we prepared to envision and experiment with alternatives for M.Div. curricula that seriously grapple with the results of research suggesting that only 10 to 20 percent of good leadership involves technical skills (knowledge of Bible, theology, church history, etc.) and cognitive abilities (native thinking capacity), while 80 to 90 percent of effective leadership draws on learned emotional intelligence?

2) If emotional intelligence is learned slowly through communities of trust involving opportunities for practice and feedback, what changes will theological educators need to make in curricula to help future pastors learn effective leadership?

Given the condition of many old-line denominations and congregations, and the need for competent and innovative leadership, the questions that emerge from the research reported in *Primal Leadership* merit vigorous conversations as well as focused experiments in leadership development for the church. Are seminaries, theological schools, and denominations up to this challenge?

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