

THE CHANGING FACE OF LEADERSHIP - JOHN SWEETMAN

A relevant leadership question is: “Does 21st century culture require a new or different form of Christian leadership?” In this article, John explores this question, probing it from both a cultural and biblical perspective.

Culture, church and Christianity in the 21st century are big issues that are explored in detail in units that we teach at Malyon. This is not the place for an in-depth examination of the subject. However, to help with an orientation to the issue, here is a table that I have adapted from Lawrence (2004, 43). It summarises some of the ideas that we will explore.

	Builders (born pre-1945)	Baby boomers (1945-65)	New generation (1966+)
Value	Faithful	Productive	Involved
First commitment	Organisation	Ministry	People
Role of leader	Stability & direction	Produce growth	Consult/understand
Working with others	Prefer alone	See need for team	Only work in team
Key question	Is it true?	Does it work?	How does it feel?
What counts	Experience	Competence	Involvement
Facing disagreement	Avoid, direct	Be pragmatic	Consult, listen

Like most generalisations and simplifications, this table doesn’t really describe any individual. All leaders are driven and moulded by a complex variety of issues of which generation of birth is only one.

But it is certainly true that cultures are different and therefore may produce different forms of leadership. For example, Australian indigenous leadership looks very different from American business leadership.

So it is possible that different experiences in life (cultures) will develop different leadership values. They may not be as clear-cut as the table suggests, but they are worth exploring in order to understand ourselves, the other-generation leaders we are working with, and the future of Christian leadership.

In *Leadership Divided*, Ron Carucci (2006), a secular business consultant, points out that the growing retirement of baby boomers has produced a leadership crisis in the West. According to a recent survey, 94% of North American human resource professionals say their organisations are inadequately preparing younger-generation employees to be senior leaders (Carucci 2006, 5).

Carucci’s response is that older leaders are looking for the wrong types of leaders. They want to replicate themselves, but the new leaders have no desire to lead in the way that they have been led. These new leaders have a different paradigm of leadership. They are looking for different relationships.

In this article, for my sources I will draw on the research of Carucci, that of a Christian author, Jimmy Long, who has written a book called *The Leadership Jump* (2009), and the Bible.

1. THE LEADER'S AUTHORITY

Older Leaders - Final Authority

Long says that *older leaders* make heroes out of individualistic, high achievers (usually men). The "heroic" leader is responsible to determine the direction, find the right answers, and implement the goals. This type of leadership is goal and program driven and is based on a hierarchical structure where the leader sits at the top. Those on the team are expected to operate independently without much supervisory or emotional support from the senior leadership.

Older leaders believe that position brings with it a certain authority. Because leaders have the final responsibility for what happens, they also have the final authority to decide what happens. They believe that followers should show respect and be loyal to them because of their position. As General Patton said, "I do not care if my men stop being afraid of the Germans, but, by God, they had better not stop being afraid of me."

Carucci is not quite so strong. His research has shown that *older leaders* have tried to resist command and control but have still relied on rank to make decisions. While they have made strides in distributing power, they still appreciate authority and feel that people should understand their place and role in the organisation. They are happy to call the shots if and when needed.

Younger Leaders - Team Player

Long argues that *younger leaders* do not trust the heroic leader, nor do they aspire to be heroic leaders. They are developing models of leadership based on community and teamwork. Long calls this style "post-heroic" leadership. Younger leaders don't take sole responsibility, but build a team of leaders who share the responsibility. Everyone on the team is a leader and everyone is responsible.

Younger leaders are sceptical about hierarchical authority and are not keen to work with such leaders. They will give respect when it is earned. They don't care about titles, positions and roles. They believe that all leaders are human and do not belong on pedestals. The most important quality of a leader is seen to be the ability to give up one's power and replace it with compassion and love. Younger leaders are looking for mentors who they can trust and who will share the journey with them.

Carucci says that *younger leaders* avoid rank as a means of making decisions and influence. They don't like to "rule the roost" but try to build consensus, eliciting and listening carefully to the opinions of others. They are only comfortable with authority when it is freely given by followers and are looking for trust based on honesty and exposure.

My Reflection

While I think that Long states the differences far too strongly, I can see an emerging change in leadership style. Among *young leaders* hierarchical structures and rules are out and relationships and networking are big. A postmodern society is not looking for heroes or experts but for fellow-travellers.

This emerging approach to leadership certainly sits well with Jesus' emphasis on servant leadership. As Christian leaders, we don't lord it over people, but we lead by serving. Serving speaks of relationships, trust, love, humility and team - the values of the *younger leaders* according to Long and Carucci. In the last 20 years we have seen many "heroic" Christian leaders fall on their faces. A

desire for power and authority is a dangerous thing for a Christian leader. I think that the *younger leaders* have got it right.

But I am also conscious that spiritual authority is an important issue for Christian leaders. We are responsible, under God, for the people God entrusts to our care. Hebrews 13:17 says: “*Obey you leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as those who must give account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden.*”

Too much emphasis on team and joint decision-making and responsibility may undermine spiritual authority and accountability. God wants you to stand up and be counted. He has called you and gifted you to take responsibility and occasionally this means (after wide consultation, seeking prayer and deep humility) making the hard decision. At times, Jesus’ servant leadership meant that he called the shots.

I’m certainly not advocating a return to the heroic leader. I love what is emerging. We are in this together. Just don’t let consultation and consensus undermine God-given spiritual authority and responsibility.

2. THE LEADER’S OPENNESS

Older Leaders - Guarded

Long says that *older leaders* have been taught that vulnerability is dangerous. They have doubts and questions but they are never voiced. They must have their act together. They are in control. The result is that they tend to lead teams of isolated individuals, and inhibit their own personal growth.

Carucci agrees that *older leaders* are generally uncomfortable with emotional language and personal intimacy. They see results and clarity as being more important than connection. While the literature on emotional intelligence has impacted their world and made them more aware of understanding themselves and others, they still see relationships as a means to an end. Many still lack genuine integrity.

Younger Leaders - Vulnerable

Long states that *younger leaders* are looking for vulnerability and honesty. This is the way they build trust and relationship. Postmoderns are not afraid of emotions, doubts, weakness or mystery. They don’t believe in perfection so they don’t need all the answers. True vulnerability requires time together to grow close relationships and genuine care for and trust in each other.

Coming from a similar perspective, **Carucci** has found that *younger leaders* are very comfortable expressing emotion and dealing with the emotions of others. They are suspicious of those who are emotionally guarded and won’t speak honestly about themselves and their feelings. Sometimes this leads them to inappropriate disclosure, but it is a risk they tend to take. They feel that it’s important to say how they feel as well as what they think.

My Reflection

I feel that I’m in the wrong category here because although my age (I’m 56) would suggest that I’m in the more guarded faction, my heart has always been for honesty and vulnerability (within reason). It just shows that no theory is watertight. Having said that, I do think that my generation has been

more careful and closed than following generations. Many *younger leaders* have asked me where they can find mentors who will be real with them.

One thing I really appreciate about the Bible is that it does not paint any leaders as perfect (except Jesus, and maybe Daniel comes close). David is probably the most respected human leader in Scripture and yet we know all about his weaknesses, his sins, his family struggles, and his personal fears. His songs are brimming with vulnerability and honesty. This surely is the way God intends it.

Of course the degree of vulnerability both *older* and *younger leaders* are comfortable with is dependent on more than age. Plenty of *young leaders* are a closed shop. Your openness will also depend on your personality, your degree of security, your culture (e.g. Asian cultures do not value vulnerability), and your experiences (some have been badly hurt by being too honest). But the trend towards greater honesty and openness is a positive spiritual sign.

But one important warning for *younger leaders*. As a leader, you can't expect your followers to walk your personal journey. This means that at times you will share your doubts, struggles and fears with your mentors and friends, but not with your followers. Sometimes they need you to be strong.

3. THE LEADER'S MANAGEMENT

Older Leaders - Task and Results

Long: *Older leaders* tend to use a command-and-control method of management and leadership. Their definition of management is "getting things done through and with people" and the processes are planning, organising and controlling. This model of management has been adopted by the church to produce organisational and numerical growth with the pastor as director or CEO. *Older leaders* emphasise task over relationships. The people in the group matter to the degree that they can help the group accomplish its task.

Carucci: *Older leaders* are very aware of the nature of team. They recognise that the leader is a member of the team and that all members of the team need to be included in the decision making process. However, they are not absolutely sold on the idea of group decisions. So while they try to include people to encourage buy-in, they also work to steer the group towards the final answer they have pre-decided. They become impatient if this doesn't happen or the process drags on.

Younger Leaders - Relationships and Involvement

Long: *Younger leaders* do not like to control, but to empower others. In a constantly changing environment, they want to set teams free to be creative, take responsibility and forge their own direction. They believe that developing a healthy culture requires freedom not control. They are influenced by the internet that distributes knowledge and power broadly and are not fearful of risk, uncertainty or change.

Younger leaders emphasise relationships over task. Teams form around shared purpose and community, not vision and plans. Community involves trust (not suspicion), cooperation (not competition), and collaboration (not division). Younger leaders are not competitive. They want to be part of a team that focuses on what can be accomplished together, not individually. Community means lots of time and patience to work through differences and make good decisions together.

Carucci: *Younger leaders* want everyone to equally enjoy the party. They don't care if the process is lengthy and are happy for everyone to have their say. They will often seek out opinions of those who are not even involved in the decision. They use decision making as a means to build inclusion and ownership, passion and commitment. For them, the result is less important than the process.

My Reflection

Again personally I find myself with a foot in both camps. I appreciate team and am absolutely committed to working in team. Yet I also have strong opinions and don't like to waste time. I value efficiency and results and so probably find myself more in the *older leaders* camp. But are my natural inclinations correct?

The concept of team is strongly tied to the biblical idea of the body (see 1 Cor. 12). We all have different abilities and contributions and function best together. We have been designed by God to work together in relationship. The loss of relationship through the privatisation of our lives is a serious departure from biblical teaching.

But do relationships take precedence over the task? Certainly the Bible emphasises the task that God has called us to (e.g. Matt. 28:19-20; Phil. 3:12-21). We have a job to do. However, the weight of biblical teaching is on the side of relationships being fundamental. God is "love." This is a relationship word.

I've had to push myself to make relationships a high priority for me. Within reason, I think that the *younger leaders* have it right.

4. THE LEADER'S VISION AND PLANS

Older Leaders - Goals and Plans

Carucci: *Older leaders* believe that effective performance is about setting goals, monitoring progress, and achieving measurable results. The process of setting targets and intentionally moving towards them is vital. They dislike inhibiting bureaucracy, but see the importance of strong processes that enable definite progress. Results are fundamental. Anyone in the organisation can have vision as long as they can achieve the results that are expected.

Long: *Older leaders* need to know the destination towards which they are heading. They want a master plan. Many churches and Christian organisations use long-term strategic planning. They spell out a clear destination and then work out the precise steps needed to reach that goal. It's then the leader's role to lead them in climbing the steps. The leaders have the answers to the questions - they have the map. They say, "Follow me."

Younger Leaders - Dreams and Freedom

Carucci: *Younger leaders* can dream for days. They are very idealistic, wanting to achieve great things, and are passionate about causes. However, they see most processes as unnecessarily bureaucratic and inhibiting creativity. So they don't generally value data and structure (it's too monotonous) and have a tendency to be impulsive. They may also struggle with holding others accountable, preferring for them to dream and enjoy freedom.

Long: *Younger leaders* want to enjoy the adventure of the journey. They feel that in a rapidly changing context, plans are quickly outdated, and so the journey becomes more important than an unpredictable destination. They still have dreams and visions, but no clear pathways. They have a compass but no map. The leader's role is to facilitate the journey together into uncharted territory. Leaders know how to ask questions not to provide answers. They say, "Let's learn to follow Jesus together."

My Reflection

Everything in me says that you need a plan. How can you hit any target without a plan? One of my sons was a long distance runner at school. He had a training regime that enabled him to hit his targets in races. Every athlete has a plan. At Malyon, I work with a four-year strategic plan and an annual operational plan. It's the way we make progress. I can't imagine not having a plan.

But then, am I just a product of my age and culture? I must admit that sometimes it's not the plan but the surprising things that God does that really make a difference. For example, I was planning a fund-raising strategy and canvassing ideas that donors might be attracted to when a member of faculty mentioned the idea of a leadership centre, and suddenly, out of nothing, Malyon Leadership and neoLeader emerged. It was never part of my plan. So God is certainly not bound to our plans.

However, I'm still nervous about no plans at all. Paul certainly had intentional plans to evangelise the Gentiles and the Old Testament is full of God's plans for his people. Take Gideon for example. God gave him a very specific plan for defeating the Midianites. So you certainly can't say that planning is unbiblical.

But is it necessary? Will dreams carry the day? I think not. I think that some form of flexible planning is important. Some form of accountability is necessary. But then, I am an *older leader*.

I would be very interested in the opinions of *younger* leaders. What do you think?

5. DEVELOPING OTHERS

Older Leaders - Advising and Equipping

Long: *Older leaders* enjoy the responsibility and challenge of leadership and expect that new leaders will surface who will aspire to similar leadership roles. They believe that these new leaders will want to forge their own way. They think that the challenge of leadership will be enough to motivate them; that they will be driven by ambition to achieve. All they need is come coaching.

Carucci: *Older leaders* are committed to developing those they believe will most contribute to the organisation. They are aware of the most effective leaders around them, judging this by their performance. They develop others by offering advice and helping them solve their problems, and they enjoy it when their support is appreciated. They can be blunt and awkward giving feedback at times. They tend to stick to facts and ideas and are not comfortable disclosing personal shortcomings or failures.

Younger Leaders - Supporting and Encouraging

Carucci: *Younger leaders* are less prescriptive in whom they will help, wanting to give to anyone who is in need. They enjoy the ensuing relationships. They fear failure over their large dreams, and so are

keen to learn from older leaders, but they won't necessarily take their ideas on board. They want guidance but not direction. They also want to hear about the failures of their leaders as well as their successes, and want their voice to count in the lives of these older leaders.

Younger leaders want a champion who will cheer them on as much for who they are as for what they do. They want someone who will believe in them and care deeply for them, no matter what their outcomes. They need constant appreciation to keep going. Their feelings of uncertainty can be consuming if they feel they've lost ground in their leader's eyes. Belief in them and gratitude for them will sustain their courage and endurance.

Long: *Younger leaders* realise that many younger leaders feel overwhelmed and have no desire to lead programs, ministries, churches or organisations. These younger leaders have passion, but they are reluctant to commit to the pain of responsibilities and systems. They are aware of their own brokenness and feel inadequate and disillusioned. Younger leaders know that these leaders will need significant encouragement and trust building to step into leadership. The only way this will happen is through building meaningful, mutual, mentoring relationships with potential leaders through which they may be inspired and supported to lead.

My Reflection

I am amazed by the way that Jesus persevered with the young leaders that God gave him. They were enthusiastic and insightful at times, but were also stupid, uncaring, unwilling, selfish and competitive at other times. He certainly didn't appear to work with the cream of the crop, but he believed in them, encouraged them, challenged them, and gave them opportunities to grow. And we know what happened in the long run.

I personally would have aimed for a higher calibre of leader to train. But then I'm an *older leader* and tend to see leadership as a privilege more than an onerous responsibility, and have this idea that everyone should be putting up their hand to lead, so there will be plenty of candidates.

This is obviously not the case. Carucci and Long both point out that *younger leaders* are somewhat reticent to lead, and when they do they need encouragement and support, not just equipping and shaping. Some of the major Christian churches and organisations developed by the *older leaders* will struggle to find new leaders unless they learn to support and encourage.

To be honest, sometimes this frustrates me, but I'm learning to encourage more. And I'm happy to talk about my weaknesses and challenges to anyone who will listen. I love the passion of *younger leaders* and I just hope that I can provide enough support and wisdom to get them started and to keep them going.

John Sweetman is the Principal of Malyon College and Director of Malyon Leadership. He lectures in the fields of pastoral ministry, leadership and preaching.