

Leading From Among What God Values About the Way We Lead Our Team Members

By Bill Robinson

I FIND AN ARROGANT RING to the term “incarnational leadership.” Think about it.

“What’s your leadership style?”

“Incarnational, of course. God becoming man; that’s how I lead. I lead like God.”

It’s the term—incarnational leadership—more than the concept that rolls my eyes. It takes a pretty well-fed self-esteem to compare one’s leadership style with the incarnation of God. But Christ’s *example* of “taking on the likeness” of those he led raises interesting questions about what God values and how we should lead.

Apparently, incarnation emerged from the inscrutable regions of God’s love as his costly method to reach across sin’s divide. God chose not to ignore the gap, accept the gap or even transcend the gap; he chose to become Jesus and bridge the gap.

The Apostle John’s first comment after declaring “the word became flesh” was that God “dwelt among us.” If John were writing for a newspaper he might have opened his description of Jesus with a big, showy miracle. Maybe he did.

Perhaps to John the biggest miracle was the first one he saw, God walking around in Galilee. At a very primal level, we hear incarnation echoing from our *imago deo* as the ultimate means of crossing whatever divides us.

Not long ago I talked my wife into renting *Lawrence of Arabia*. I didn’t tell her this epic took an epoch to watch. My favorite scene in this entire, interminable movie is the point at which the Bedouin ruler fully accepts the leadership of an interloping British soldier, TE Lawrence. After Lawrence removes his British uniform, wet from an act of heroism, the *Sherif* throws it into the fire and presents Lawrence with full Arab regalia. Through this act, the Bedouin ruler ushered Lawrence across the divide of race, culture and colonialism. Lawrence took on the likeness of the Bedouins he sought to lead; he became Lawrence of Arabia.

So, what does this divine idea of “taking on the likeness” of those we lead have to say about providing leadership in our organizations? I think the lessons abound.

I’m in a line of work that encourages “being above” more than “being with.” When I became a college president in 1986, I went to a conference for new presidents in which our leadership guru told us that we needed to take our place on the pedestal and stave off the efforts of all who would remove us.

Interesting advice. I start a job where I have the highest salary, a free car, a free house, the biggest office and a travel and entertainment budget. And my instructions for leading? Climb on a pedestal; create more distance from those you lead.

In other words, I should grab more of what I already have at the

expense of the one thing

I don’t have—authentic peer to peer relationships.

All industries foster implicit and explicit forces that separate leaders from their people.

Transparency is exchanged for guardedness while the persona

works hard to mask the person.

If God Incarnate pitched his tent right in the middle of those whom he led—those whom he called his friends—what should we as leaders do? I have become convinced that the best place from which to lead is not above our people, not in front of our people, not under our people, and not on our cell phones with our people.

The most powerful position of leadership is dwelling among those God calls us to lead. As Jesus emptied himself to take on the form of a bond-servant (Philippians 2:5, 6), we must empty ourselves of the pretenses and privileges that create distance between us and our people.

Pedestal leadership is perpetuated by those who enjoy sitting on the pedestal. I’m still waiting to hear an hourly employee complain that our leaders need to be more aloof. Until that happens, our best bet for inspiring those we lead is to follow the example of Jesus. “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth.”

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