

Missional Habits

by Jim Fann

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According to Stephen Covey, one of the marks of effective people is that they build key habits into their daily lives because they are motivated by a strong sense of mission. It makes me wonder. Are there any mission-driven habits that will make us more effective as church leaders? I think there are. Here's my proposed list, based on 1 Timothy 6:11-16.

Habit 1: Be Both Theological and Experiential

In *To Know and Love God*, David Clark joins the debate about whether evangelicalism is a theological or experiential movement. There's no need to choose, he argues. It's like the Moebius Strip:

The Moebius Strip

The Moebius Strip has two sides, yet the twist means the two sides exhibit an obvious unity. An ant walking along the band will find he is able to hike continuously. He circles once on the inside, then hits the "twist" and circles on the outside, only to hit the "twist" and go back to the inside. Similarly, evangelical spirituality is a dynamic, two-in-one reality in which the theological dimension and the experiential dimension are both essential (p. xxix).

One of the habits of effective church leaders is that they have mastered the practice of embracing this dual reality. They marry the theological and experiential in everything they do.

They are centered on God. For example, they aspire to be men or women of God (1 Tim. 6:11). They live in the sight of God (6:13). They feel their dependence on God "who gives life to everything" (6:13).

They wait on the timing of God (6:15). And they stand in awe of God (6:15-16). In short, everything about them is God-centered.

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Because of this, they're also committed to God's distinctive community, the church (1 Tim. 3:5, 15). They see it for what it is but also for what it can become.

Second, they acknowledge that the church is an organization that has structures (both formal and informal), assorted relationships, prescribed roles and functions (such as elders and deacons), and procedures and policies (either stated or implied). However, they also know that organizations can never substitute for spiritual life.

Third, effective church leaders are redemptive in their purpose. Their nonnegotiable objective is spiritual transformation of both individuals and churches. As a result, effective church leaders are unremitting in their desire to meet human need. One evidence of this is their willingness to adapt their leadership style to various levels of maturity, readiness, and ability (cf. 1 Cor. 3:2; 9:19-23).

Finally, highly effective church leaders do all this in a deeply reflective way. They refuse to line up with those who replace dead orthodoxy with anti-intellectual activism or moralism rather than with theologically vital spirituality. Instead, their major purpose is to shape and guide the faith, experience, and character of Christians. Like Paul in 1 Timothy, they see this as "central to the life and mission of the church" (Clark, p. 210).

Habit 2: Aim Higher

In 1 Timothy 6:9-11, Paul contrasts the man of God with the false teachers, who are more men of the world than of God. This illustrates a second major habit of effective church leaders. Their aim is higher than the world's.

1. They flee lesser things

When Paul says, "But you, man of God, flee from all this" (v. 11), he's referring to what he has just described in verses 3-10. Timothy is to flee the false teaching that "does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching" (v. 3). He's to flee conceit

(v. 4). He's to flee "controversies and quarrels about words" (v. 4). And he's to flee the contagious notion--it can even infect our concept of godliness--that life is ultimately about material gain (vv. 5, 10).

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2. *They pursue better things*

In addition to counseling flight as a strategy, Paul's second imperative is to follow hard after (lit., "pursue") spiritual virtues (1 Tim. 6:11). For example,

- a. "Righteousness." In the Bible, righteousness almost always refers to just dealings and fair treatment of others. It's based, of course, on the right standing with God we receive through Christ (cf. Phil. 1:11), and it is produced in us by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17) but it's no less "behavioral" for all that.
- b. "Godliness," or piety, is our devotion to living life in a God-honoring way.
- c. "Faith" and "love" refer to our trust in God and self-giving service for the sake of others.
- d. "Endurance" has been described as patience in difficult circumstances.
- e. "Gentleness," on the other hand, is patience with difficult people.

3. *They take hold of eternal life*

Paul directs Timothy to "take hold of . . . eternal life" (1:12). "Take hold" is a violent verb. It's used, for example, of the crowd's "seizing" Paul and dragging him from the temple (Acts 21:30). That's the attitude Timothy is to take toward eternal life. He already has it. Now he's to live it to the full.

If there *is* anything distinctive about this particular habit, it's that leaders never outgrow their need of it--and that part of their calling is to model it consistently to others.

Habit 3: Attend to the Core

Built to Last authors James Collins and Jerry Porras argue that exceptional organizations are willing to change everything about themselves except their core ideology. The same habit is true of exceptional church leaders. We see this in Paul's next statement to "fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim. 6:12). Note three things.

First, the language again is intense. The phrase literally means, agonize the good agony. It describes the voluntary agony of an athlete in training, for example, of a runner in a grueling race or a boxer in the ring.

Second, this is not just any competition. The contest is for the church's core ideology--*the* faith. (The definite article is important.) Paul is referring to the essential gospel faith, to what he has variously described in 1 Timothy as "the truth" (2:3; 3:15; 4:3), "the good teaching" (4:6), "our teaching" (6:1),

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and "the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and . . . godly teaching" (6:3). *This* is "what has been entrusted to [our] care" (6:20).

That is, finally, what makes the leader's struggle a "good" one.

Habit 4: Lead from the Front

One of the characteristics of spiritual leaders in the New Testament is their habit of being out front.

1. In 1 Timothy, Paul gives the example of Jesus' testimony before Pilate (6:13). In another place, he holds out the whole of Jesus' life and attitude as a precedent for believers to follow (cf. Phil. 2:5-8; 1 Pet. 2:21-24).
2. In Acts we see Peter standing up *with* the eleven on the day of Pentecost (2:14), standing up *to* the Sanhedrin in the face of opposition (4:1-22), and standing *before* fellow believers, leading them in prayer (4:23-31).
3. Paul himself pioneered evangelism and church planting throughout the Roman world.
4. In spite of Timothy's being youthful (1 Tim. 4:12) and timid by nature (2 Tim. 1:7), Paul encouraged him to set an example (1 Tim. 4:12).

Habit 5: Invest in the Development of Other Leaders

Effective leaders don't ignore other people. But they invest themselves in "reliable" people "who will also be qualified" to lead (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). This is, in fact, what Paul has been doing in Timothy's life for years. The writing of 1 Timothy is only the most recent example.

From the Bible and experience, we can say--with Kennon Callahan (*Twelve Keys Leaders Guide*, pp. 67-70)--that the most effective investors in the multiplication of leaders habitually do the following things.

1. *They make leadership development a strategic priority, not an appendage to everything else.*
2. *They focus on the people who feel comfortable in some leadership situations but whose competencies can be advanced.*
3. *They match developing leaders with ministries that emphasize their current strengths.*
4. *They match developing leaders with people they fit. Leadership is contextual.*
5. *They match developing leaders with plays the players can run.*

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6. *They focus them on a few strategic things.*
7. *They provide them with well-defined structure and accountability.*

Habit 6: Invest in Your Own Development for the Sake of Others

Leadership can be learned but it demands self-investment. This is part of what Paul is getting at in every imperative or command he writes to Timothy. The habit that distinguishes effective leaders is that they are diligent in this matter. They give themselves wholly to it (1 Tim. 4:15).

Gordon MacDonald is a modern example. In *A Resilient Life*, he advises leaders to surround themselves with "a happy few," those "certain people who enable us to be as we have never been before." He learned this from his experience of personal failure.

As an exercise in identifying these important people, MacDonald offers the following questions (pp. 226-38):

1. *Who coaches you?*
2. *Who stretches your mind?*

3. *Who listens to and encourages your dreams?*
4. *Who protects you?*
5. *Who shares your tears?*
6. *Who rebukes you?*
7. *Who plays with you?*
8. *Who is it that seeks after God with you?*

Prayerful consideration of each of these questions would be a good agenda for a personal retreat.

As I look back over these six habits, I'm tempted to say that the habits of highly effective church leaders are essentially the marks of leadership maturity. One thing I do know is this: It's the kind of leadership that consistently produces healthy churches.

This article, which quotes from the NIV, is summarized from Jim Fann's soon-to-be-published book, *Steering Clear: Leadership Strategies for the Almost Healthy Church*. It can be purchased from EFCA's Next Step Resources (800/444-2665, or <http://tenderfoot.windborne.net/nextstep>).