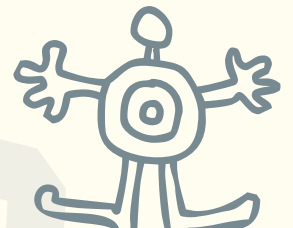


# The Heart of Spiritual Student Leadership



tim milburn



# **The Heart of Spiritual Student Leadership**

Written by Tim Milburn

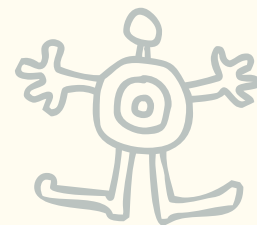
Dedicated to the young men and women who exercised their God-given abilities and stood above the fray and led.

Originally printed in NYI Today, April, 2000 - a quarterly publication of Nazarene Youth International

version 0613.3

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“Inconceivable!” exclaimed Vescini for the tenth time.

Turning to his obnoxious boss, the sword-wielding Spaniard, Inigo Montoya replies “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

Some of you will recognize that scene from the classic film, *The Princess Bride*. I don't know how many times I've quoted that line (with my best Inigo Montoya accent) when I heard someone say a word or use a phrase numerous times in a way that didn't seem appropriate or fit right.

It rings in my mind again as I hear so many in youth ministry who are promoting some type of “student leadership team” within their groups. I want to stand up and say “You keep using that term. I do not think it means what you think it means!”

### **Leadership Training...Really?**

Caution, blessed and chosen youth worker! Just because you're putting together a leadership team of students, taking them on a leadership retreat, giving them cool polo shirts with the word “STUDENT LEADER” stitched on it, and having a leadership meeting every other week doesn't mean you've got a group of leaders.

Leadership is influence. It's the ability to inspire people to follow. If a leader has no followers, then that person is simply not leading. Many of us, myself included, have fallen into the trap of gathering a group of students who are interested in involvement and called it the leadership team. Involvement and influence are two different things. It may seem



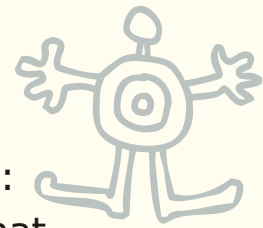
that I'm arguing over semantics, but I've discovered that most of the "leadership teams" we create are nothing more than the organizational, hands-on group of the youth ministry. That's not necessarily leadership.

My first "leadership" team was called "The Crew." A rag-tag group of junior high and high school students who applied and were accepted to be the leaders in our youth group. We did everything the current book on "how-to-build-a-student-leader" told us to do. Yet I still had student "leaders" that didn't show up to events they had planned, student "leaders" who brought alcohol on retreats, student "leaders" who found themselves walking away from God for a period of time, and student "leaders" who forgot that they were supposed to be friendly to the visitors in our group. It was discouraging.

I know not everyone will buy into a program, even when they're knee-deep in it. I know that we all make mistakes. And like most of us, I've attempted to establish an effective youth ministry that provides space for mistakes and failure in a grace-filled environment. But I'm learning more and more, that simply putting a student in a position of leadership and giving them a t-shirt does not mean that student is a leader. In fact, many of my most influential student leaders never wore the t-shirts and never joined the programs.

Please don't misunderstand. I believe that most of the programs that get students planning the calendar, taking the pictures, and serving each other are beneficial and necessary within our youth ministries. But they're aimed at involvement, not influence. Early on in my youth ministry experience, I would simply implement a program that got students involved and feel that I've done my job in developing student leaders. What I

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discovered was that wasn't intentional enough. I have to continually ask the question: "What type of student leader am I working to develop and what must take place for that development to be effective?"

### **What's The Goal?**

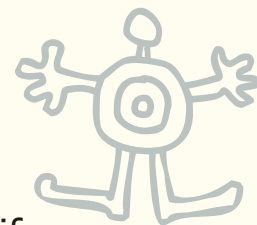
One of the first things that is important to remember for anyone desiring to influence students toward becoming and growing into leaders is that it takes time; it is a process. We are granted, at most, a six-year window to invest in the life of a student while they are involved in our youth ministries. And even though we may provide a variety of avenues and invest major amounts of time for him or her to develop, they may or may not buy into what we're offering.

Not only that, but many times, the programs we're offering simply don't produce leaders. They produce organizers, managers, creative thinkers, planners, and implementers; but not necessarily leaders. Granted, many of those things are important attributes in the make-up of a leader, but they don't address the heart and soul of what it means to truly lead. We must be constantly mindful of the direction we are taking with students who desire to step up into leadership roles. Simply offering a leadership program through your youth ministry does not guarantee that a student will become a leader after he or she has walked through it.

### **The Goal of Spiritual Leadership**

I would argue that the goal of our leadership training must be different than most opportunities students have from their schools, work, and community. Our focus is on the

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development of spiritual influence. It's the task of raising up spiritual people who use spiritual methods to achieve spiritual goals. Our training must allow students to identify gifts and abilities that may be dormant in their lives and work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit as He unleashes these attributes in a student's life.

The center of our attention must be in the development of effective church leaders whose influence may filter out into society, not the other way around. Oswald Sanders, in his book, *Spiritual Leadership*, gives this definition of the type of leaders the church needs today:

“If the world is to hear the church's voice today, leaders are needed who are authoritative, spiritual, and sacrificial.” He goes on to describe these three key areas by saying: “Authoritative, because people desire leaders who know where they are going and are confident of getting there. Spiritual, because without a strong relationship to God, even the most attractive and competent person cannot lead people to God. Sacrificial, because this follows the model of Jesus, who gave himself for the whole world and who calls us to follow in His steps.”

In studying the lives of great leaders within the church, I have seen that they were people who understood how to lead their inner lives before they were able to lead other's lives. Thus, my personal philosophy of training students in leadership focuses not so much on what they get out of it as much as what they are becoming by it. It's a people-shaping process. Realizing that we are all on the journey of developing our own leadership aptitude, I encourage students to understand that progress is not a one-time event, but

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small steps in a certain direction along the path to become like Jesus. It's understanding anew the words of Paul when he shared that "God, who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears." (Philippians 1:6 TM)

### **You Must Qualify**

In high school, I was on the track team for one year. I wasn't that good. I know this because there were always more people crossing the finish line before me than there were after me.

Throughout my lackluster season, my personal goal was to qualify for the finals at end of each track meet. You see, before the finals, there were a number of qualifying races to see who the fastest runners were. Basically, all the runners couldn't be on the track at the same time, so only the top runners from each qualifying race would compete in the finals race.

The truth is, everyone there wanted to win, but only the fastest and best prepared were even given a chance to compete for the prize.

In his first letter to young Timothy, the apostle Paul gives clear direction that a person must qualify to be a spiritual leader. It's not for everyone. He states that,

"If anyone wants to provide leadership in the church, Good! But there are preconditions. . ." (3:1-2a TM).



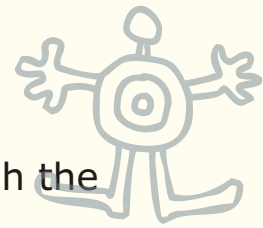
While everyone may desire to be in a place of spiritual influence, only those who achieve a certain character of heart will be effective in that role.

As I reflect on the role that our youth ministries can play in developing student leaders, I believe that we must offer opportunities for students to develop the following types of qualifications that Paul lines out for Timothy. It is also true that we must exhibit these qualifications personally; modeling them in front of those we lead.

### **The Qualifications**

The qualities of leadership that Paul taught are as relevant now as during the first century. We would be wise in considering them as crucial elements in our leadership training. Here are the fourteen traits that Paul spells out along with some thoughts as to how these traits can impact our own student development training:

- Well Thought of - Spiritual leaders recognize that character development has more value and always precedes the building of a positive reputation.
- Committed to his/her spouse - Most students aren't even thinking about marriage, but that shouldn't keep them from maintaining sexual purity both before and after they are married.
- Cool & Collected - The ability to display a quiet confidence, not feeling the need to force their way through life.



- Accessible - Here we can teach our students what it means to walk slowly through the crowd, listening to and meeting the needs of those around them.
- Hospitable - Spiritual leaders are fun to be around and exhibit a welcoming spirit.
- Know What You're Talking About - the ability to explain their faith and the journey they are on in a way that encourages and edifies the church.
- Not Reliant On Any Substance - In a world that is torn by hurtful addictions, a spiritual leader seeks to be addicted to and rely fully on Jesus Christ.
- Displaying Gentleness - Demonstrating influence that is not pushy but gentle because of the realization that God is in control.
- Not Thin-skinned - A spiritual leader must be able to handle criticism and failure, be teachable, and show emotions while not becoming over emotional.
- Not In It For The Money - How a spiritual leader handles his or her finances says a lot about who they are as a person.
- Personally Well Organized And Wise In Their Personal Life - This one speaks for itself.
- Making Family A Priority - A spiritual leader practices leadership at home first before seeking to influence those around them.



Not A New Believer In Christ - A spiritual leader must be on the journey to spiritual maturity.

Well Thought Of By Those Outside The Church - As a spiritual leader seeks to be an effective leader within the church, their influence will be felt beyond the walls of the church.

### **Some Observations**

I've spent many hours contemplating this list, both for my students and myself. It has been an exciting and humbling adventure to experiment with different ways to develop these qualifications in young lives so that they may serve effectively as spiritual leaders within the church. Throughout this process, I have observed a number of things:

These attributes that Paul shares with Timothy closely resemble the fruits of the Spirit, acknowledging the fact that spiritual leadership is a process that God births within us.

While pride is not specifically mentioned, the practice of humility is woven throughout the list.

The issue of character is mentioned at the start and end of the list, emphasizing its importance.

Spiritual growth is vital - Changed people change people.



- Personal leadership of our own lives must be formed before public leadership of others can take place.
- Leaders are prone to greater temptations and must avoid those things that would trip him or her up due to the effect that it has on those whom they influence when they fall.
- Being position-minded leads to pride.
- These characteristics are born out of a heart that desires to please God and implemented in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we reflect on the nature of our leadership training, I am reminded of how well John Mott captured the heart of spiritual leadership when he said,

“Leadership in the sense of rendering maximum service; leadership in the sense of the largest unselfishness; in the sense of full-hearted absorption in the greatest work of the world: building up the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

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J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*. Moody Press, Chicago. 1967. p18.

B. Matthews, John R. Mott. SCM Press, London. 1934. p346.

## About Tim Milburn

Tim is the Director of Campus Life at Northwest Nazarene University in Nampa, Idaho. Most of his responsibilities involve developing student leaders and creating a sense of community on campus.

Tim lives in Eagle, Idaho with his wife, Judy, and their four children: Travis, Victoria, Mitchell, and Abigail. When Tim isn't speaking or writing or equipping others, he is usually spending time at his kid's activities and enjoying the great Idaho outdoors.

More information can be found at his website:

[www.timagedesign.com](http://www.timagedesign.com)

From there you can view his student leadership blog and see some samples of Tim's work in the area of design, writing and speaking.

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