

“A refresher course on how to balance leading with the head,
the heart, and the soul.”

—**JOHN C. MAXWELL**

New York Times bestselling author



THE EXCEPTIONAL LEADER

MOTIVATED TO SUCCEED,
EQUIPPED TO EXCEL

STAN TOLER



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“Stan Toler has written an engaging and informative book that will give the novice leader a mentor and the veteran leader a refresher course on how to balance leading with the head, the heart, and the soul. I highly recommend this book on becoming an effective leader.”

JOHN MAXWELL

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FOREWORD

Leading is tough work, as anyone who has tried it for as long as I have knows. It's even more difficult to lead well. To become an exceptional leader is one of the greatest goals in life, so let your influence be one of excellence and lasting impact. Being involved in the professional sports business for many years now, I've had the opportunity to meet some very talented individuals. But big salaries, lofty roles, and glamorous publicity aren't what make a person great. Making an enduring mark with your life is more a matter of character and spirit than anything else. The big playmakers in life are the ones who help the rest of us aim toward a unified goal. That's what leadership is all about.

This is a must-read book for twenty-first-century leaders who want to lead with both soul and talent. Its narrative format makes it an easy read for busy people.

Leadership is more difficult and more in demand today than ever before. Yesterday's methods and mindsets are insufficient. I encourage you to savor the thoughts you're about to read. Don't just ingest them like fast food; let them marinate in your mind and soul. They have the capacity to help you be your best and to raise the level of your leadership to new heights.

—Jerry Colangelo,
Naismith Basketball Hall of Famer



INTRODUCTION

Whether you're in ministry, business, politics, education, or community service, people are talking not only about the need for more leaders, but also the need for better leaders. The rapid rate of change today has created a need for those who will lead at a higher dimension. Mere mental or physical manipulation doesn't cut it anymore; organizations and societies have evolved beyond traditional modes of influence. People want more. Effective leaders draw from five leadership realms, creating a synergy for change and organizational vitality. Throughout history many great leaders have led this way: with their heads, hearts, and souls. In today's world, this kind of leading is not optional if we are to be effective.

Many of us are intimidated by these gleaming, breathing leadership icons. Yet the principles by which they lead are within the grasp of most of us. For the roles that heaven calls us to fill, we have been given the ability to succeed.

This book tells the story of a contemporary sage who mentors a young leader who is in over his head. You are encouraged to eavesdrop on their beachside conversations and to capitalize on the journaling of Tim as he processes the main points of effective leading from his mentor, Paul. I've added some blank lined pages at the back of the book in case you want to make notes of your own.

—Stan Toler



1

THE LEADER'S MENTOR

Learning to Look for Logjams

Tim strolled down the long, empty beach, almost oblivious to the squawking seagulls, crashing waves, and misty morning breeze. His head swirled with concerns about work. Months ago, Tim had been selected as an up-and-coming leader within his organization. He'd been promoted beyond his years, which initially gave him an incredible sense of exhilaration. Now, things did not seem to be going so well. What began as a dream was becoming a bit of a nightmare. He didn't know what to do about the doldrums that had infiltrated his department. Notes he

had written in his daily journal reminded him that things were not sailing along the way he had envisioned. The excitement of his people was fading, and no matter what changes and incentives he introduced, nothing seemed to make much difference. Although he would never admit it to his superiors or to those he led, Tim was beginning to doubt himself. Why had he been promoted to a place where he was unable to excel?

Every weekend for the last month, Tim had brought his wife and sons to the beach. His stress and long hours at work were taking a toll on his family, but at the beach everyone enjoyed the surroundings and playing in the surf. The bustle of downtown San Diego and the business centers of south Orange County, though just minutes away on the freeway, seemed far from this Carlsbad beach house. Tim's friend had given him a great off-season deal on the rent, and Tim welcomed the escape from the pressures of work and life. Even though it was temporary, it sure felt good for now.

While his wife and kids slept, Tim got up early, poured a mug of coffee, and walked surfside. Even Southern California beaches, packed in the summer, are practically empty during winter Saturday mornings. His walks lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to a couple of hours, depending on how much thinking got done. *Why is my organization*

stuck under my leadership? Why doesn't God give me the wisdom I need to be a better leader? Why do people always ask why when they are in a pickle? And why does God seem silent when you ask why questions?

Maybe heaven wasn't interested in the practical matters of life—such as being an effective leader. Church, spirituality, and Scripture seemed far removed from the relevance of work and business. *Maybe God doesn't really offer solutions for everyday problems—maybe inner peace and hope are all I can expect*, thought Tim. But lately, he had felt that peace and hope were scarce. Perplexing thoughts had stolen the joy he experienced at the beginning of a new challenge. His emotions right now were like the tide: ebbing and flowing.

As he rounded the bend of the shore on his way back to the house, he spotted an old man sitting on the deck of a beachside cottage. He had seen the white-haired man a few times, and they generally exchanged nods, waves, or a brief hello. On previous days with the tide coming in, it was difficult to hear each other over the crashing waves. But today, Tim thought he should extend his friendship a little further. As he came closer to the man's house, Tim mustered a smile and waved. "Good morning!" he shouted.

"It sure is," the man responded. "Nothing beats an early walk on the beach to clear your thoughts."

The man's disarming smile and penetrating eyes drew

Tim to the stairs leading up to the deck. “Yeah, it beats a therapist’s couch. My family and I are renting a friend’s house down the beach. We’ll be driving up from the city for the next few weekends.”

“Forgive me for being straightforward,” the old man said, “but what do you think about when you stroll on the sand?”

“Oh, you know. Just work stuff.”

“How are things going in your work?”

“Well, to be honest, things have been better. I received a promotion a few months ago, but lately I just haven’t been cutting it.” Tim surprised himself for going beyond the usual “I’m fine” response with the stranger.

“Ah, that’s the challenge of leadership, isn’t it?”

Tim climbed the stairs as if invited to come up to the deck. “How do you know I’m a leader?”

“Have a seat,” the man said, motioning to one of the cushioned wooden deck chairs. “My name is Paul.” He stood up slowly and extended his hand.

“Hi, I’m Tim,” the younger man said as he shook hands and then sat down.

“I thought you might be a leader because I’ve worked with leaders for most of my life and, frankly, I’m pretty familiar with the look I see on your face,” Paul said, his eyes twinkling.

“I’m not alone in my misery, huh?”

Paul laughed loudly. “Oh, every generation thinks it’s the first to go through the problems leaders always experience: perplexing situations, self-doubt, dealing with people and with frustrations when things don’t go as planned.” Paul leaned forward in his chair. “Plus, the thrill of making a difference, of seeing your influence motivate people to accomplish what they could not do without your leadership.”

Usually, Tim would have been irritated by Paul’s assumption about his situation, but for some reason, he wasn’t this time. The old man’s nonthreatening style intrigued him.

“What did you do for a living, assuming you’re retired?” Tim asked.

“I’m very much retired, but for most of my life I did one thing: I led.” Paul leaned back in his chair. “First it was in the military, then politics, business, and eventually community and nonprofit groups. The last couple of decades, I’ve been a consultant to organizations wanting to develop their leadership. I’ve worked in large and small environments—both entrepreneurial and institutional settings. Leadership is pretty generic, though. The same principles apply to most groups.”

“Wow, that’s impressive. Maybe I could pick your brain a little.”

“I’d love it. And you don’t have to worry. Because I’m retired, I won’t charge you the big bucks I used to get for my input,” Paul said with a smile, leaning forward and tapping Tim on the knee.

Tim grinned. “So even though you don’t know my specific situation, you believe I’m wrestling with something that’s not all that unusual?”

“I’m not dismissing your concerns, Tim, and I don’t claim to know your particular circumstances, but over the years I’ve observed that the problems of leading are common. Leadership is a natural process.”

“Leadership is natural?” Tim asked. “What do you mean? It seems to me that leading is about going against the tide and bucking the trend. It requires a lot of effort.”

Paul reached into a wicker basket beside his chair on the deck. He pulled out a seashell and tossed it out on the beach. “That shell fell all by itself, didn’t it? I threw it, but the laws of nature—in this instance gravity—took over. Leadership often happens naturally. No matter where you go in history or civilization, you will see leadership happening. It’s a natural social process in response to a personal need. Our creator instilled this need within people along with the capacity for cooperation to help them accomplish tasks together. We didn’t invent leadership, and we don’t have to force it. People want to be led well.”

**A LEADER DOESN'T
HAVE TO CREATE
LEADERSHIP.
THE FORCES OF
NATURE STRIVE TO
LET LEADERSHIP
HAPPEN.**



Tim stroked his jaw as he tried to digest Paul's theory of leadership. "So if it's a law of nature, why are there so many books and seminars about leadership? And why am I having such a difficult time doing my job if it's natural?"

"I suppose it's the same reason you go to classes to prepare for natural childbirth," Paul said. "Natural does *not* mean effortless—or even easy. Birth, DNA replication, and photosynthesis are natural but incredibly complex processes. Diamonds are created naturally but only after years of intense geologic pressure. Waves are natural, but they can wreck ships, demolish homes, and tumble surfers like leaves in autumn winds."

"I'm still not sure I understand how leadership is natural."

"Let me put it another way. I have a friend, John, who was a lumberjack in Oregon. John frequently compares leadership with logging. In the old days, they cut down the trees and floated the logs on the river to the sawmill. The flow of the river did the work of hundreds of trucks. Sometimes, though, the logs would get stuck. Instead of going with the flow, they began piling up in long, compacted areas; you know—logjams. Experienced, skillful loggers could look at a jam and identify which logs were causing the problem. They walked out to those specific logs and moved them, which allowed the river to do its work to free the logs to float downstream. A primary job of a capable

leader is to see where leadership is getting jammed and to free up the process. A leader doesn't have to create leadership. You're not doing something unnatural when you lead. The forces of nature strive to let leadership happen."

"Wow, that's a lot different from how I've thought about it. But if it's natural, why does it seem like there are so many problems that go along with leading?"

"Well, leading isn't easy; but then, neither is lumberjacking—even when things go smoothly. The perceived problem is that many organizations are undergoing stress and that the complexity of leading today is greater than in the past, but the basic tenets of leadership remain the same."

"Are the logs people, metaphorically?"

"No, the logs represent leadership issues, and the lumberjacks are the leaders. When leaders lead well, they get a lot of credit for doing very little, because leadership is a natural process. It's when leadership gets stuck that leaders are needed. They earn their accolades when they recognize the snags and do something about them."

"Hmm," Tim mused. "Thinking about leadership as a natural process is a whole different twist on things. I wonder where the logjams are among my workers and in their schedules and job assignments."

"Now you're getting it," Paul said. "I gather you're a quick learner. If we let leadership just happen instead of

trying to make it or force it, our problems become far more strategic and less power oriented and manipulative. Allowing leadership to flow naturally opens your eyes to new ways of getting out of the way.”

“When you consulted on leadership, did you focus on the way logs flow in the river, or did you look at the loggers?”

“Ah, good question,” Paul said, smiling. “The key lies in training the loggers to understand the flow and to know where and how to find the hindrances.”

Tim sat silently as he thought about Paul’s ideas. “You seem pretty confident about these things.”

“I hope I don’t seem smug. I guess it’s just that I’ve been a student of leadership for most of my life, and I’ve also observed the same logjams occurring over and over. The old 80/20 rule works here as well as anywhere. If you take care of the most common 20 percent of the problems, you’ll remedy 80 percent of the snags. Leadership sinks when it runs into organizational icebergs. Like the *Titanic*, leadership accidents happen more by what you don’t see than by what you do. What often gets blamed as the cause really isn’t the problem when you look closely. Symptoms can be confused with causes. It’s what we don’t see that often gets at the problem.”

“What are those 20 percent issues?”

Paul reached back down into the basket beside his chair

and pulled a starfish from his seashore collection. “A few years ago, you could find starfish all over this beach. Now, they’ve all but disappeared.” Paul handed the starfish to Tim. “The typical starfish has five arms, giving the appearance of a five-point star. Leadership typically gets hung up in at least one or more of the same five areas.”

“What areas are those?”

“Curious, aren’t you? I like that. Tell you what, Tim, if you agree to meet me here for a couple hours the next few Saturday mornings, I’d be happy to share with you what I’ve learned over the years.”

“I would really appreciate that, Paul. It’s as if you’ve read my mind. I’ve been thinking a lot about my leadership at work. I feel as though I’m stuck. I’d love to get your advice if you have the time.”

“As you know, time is life, Tim. It’s all we have. What we do with our limited amount of time is what makes the difference. My time is at a premium lately, but I would love to spend a few hours talking with you when you come up here on the weekends.”

“I’m grateful for the offer.”

“All right, it’s a deal. Meet me here, Saturday mornings at eight o’clock. No contracts, just a handshake.”

Tim stood up and extended his hand to his stately new mentor.

“Excuse me for not standing. My legs aren’t what they used to be.” Paul took Tim’s hand and shook it firmly.

“Paul, you’re a godsend. I’ll look forward to our meeting next week.”

“You never know what you’ll find along the beach. Have faith, my friend.”

Waving goodbye, Tim continued his walk, stepping more lightly than before. Finally, he had discovered a leadership mentor.