

Bison Talk S4E5

Leadership: The importance of leadership in both personal and professional development

Cate Zenzen

The concept of leadership has many applications. Opportunities to learn from or be a leader exist in both our personal and professional lives. In fact, most of us can be both a leader and a follower, depending on the situation. What does a good leader look like and how can we foster leadership development within ourselves?

My name is Cate Zenzen and welcome to Bison Talk.

Today, I'm joined by Dr. Matt Paden, an expert in leadership development as a speaker, consultant and professor of both undergraduate and graduate courses on the subject. His expertise covers leadership as it pertains to an organization, change, culture and development. Paden is also the Senior Vice President of Enrollment and Student Engagement at Lipscomb University, which covers Student Life, Enrollment and University Athletics.

Thank you, Dr. Paden for joining me today.

Matt Paden

Thanks, Cate, glad to be here.

CZ

You consider yourself to be an expert in leadership development. What is your background and how did you get to that level of expert?

MP

I would probably slow the expert talk, a little bit. I do consider myself to be a student of leadership, and I've been a student of leadership for a long time. I had mentors in my life that expressed to me pretty intently early on, even in college and as an undergrad, that the study of leadership and the study of leaders would go a long way in helping me be a better leader myself.

I think leadership is a journey, much more so than it is a destination. I have looked at it a lot, I've studied, I have a doctoral degree in leadership, I've read way too many books on the subject and listened to way too many thinkers and speakers. What I really have tried to do is be a student, try to learn from leaders and learn from those who think about leadership and study it deeply. Especially as it relates to life in an organization and how you move people from where they are to where they need to be.

CZ

Many of us may think of a leader as someone who is in a position of authority, but that's not always true. What would you consider to be the necessary qualifications to become a leader?

MP

Leadership is much more than a position. That's what a lot of people would start with, when they think about leadership, they think of your CEOs, they think of your leaders of organizations, the manager of your store, or whatever it may be in your context. There is a piece to that, but I do think leadership is more than just a position, it has to be. There's so many different things that I think about with leadership.

I tell my classes all the time, and when I did more work with outside partners in the past in terms of consulting, I have a favorite definition of leadership that has been with me for probably a decade now. I keep looking for a new one, maybe I'll come up with a better one one day, but there are a million definitions of leadership. And then there's even more, probably, pictures in people's minds of what leadership really is. Kevin Cashman in his book, "Leadership From the Inside Out," defined leadership as, "Authentic influence that creates value." There's three pieces there that are really, really important to consider.

First is that authentic piece. I talk about this a lot in an MBA class I teach here at Lipscomb called, Embracing Values. Being authentic is so critical to leadership, to life really, but to leadership too. Understanding who you are, what's important to you, what you value, not shying away from that because you hold a position and not hiding that from the people you may be in care of, or those that you may be leading. Being authentic is being true to yourself, because the first person we have to lead, and oftentimes the hardest person to lead, is our self. If we're living an inauthentic life, or if we are living in a way that our words and actions don't match up with our beliefs, others are going to see that and are going to be impacted by that.

In terms of leadership, one of the lessons that many people may have been taught by a family member, for me it was my grandmother, "a sermon lived is a whole lot better than a sermon spoken." The same with leadership. Leadership lived out is way better, and way more impactful, than leadership that's just talked about. That authentic piece is really, really important, and I think that's where it all starts.

The influence piece is important to me, because we live in a world where there's so many instances where people can equate leadership with power. Power is a real thing. In every organization, every department, every grouping, every family there's the power structure, there's power dynamics. What I love about Cashman's definition of leadership is that it's not just about being authentic, but it's about influence, more than just power. Power suggests control, power suggests position, power suggests the ability to reward someone else or to force someone else, and I don't think that's what leadership really is. I think there's moments where the leader has to operate from a stance of power, think about crises, think about times that are really challenging where somebody has to take the lead, make a call and do

something about a situation that's in crisis. But for the most part, influence is going to be way more impactful than power. If we're true to ourselves, if we understand who we are in terms of our values and the things that we hold dear, and if we're trying to live those out, not just talk about those, we're going to develop influence which has a whole lot to do with reputation and the ability to persuade. I think leadership is not about power, but influence. By that I mean leadership is a whole lot more about pulling people along, as opposed to pushing people along.

The last part, “creates value,” “Authentic influence that creates value,” I love that part. Because it's not just a position, and it's not just about having a position and doing nothing with it. It's not just about being elected, it's not just about being named this role. It's not just about being voted in to lead this organization or that. It's not just about being the Student Government Association president on a college campus, or being president of a social club, or a student organization. It's about doing something with that and leading in such a way where you are pulling people towards something new, different and better, and a picture of what could be. That's why I love the idea of creating value.

You can put that in the business context for leaders in the business world when you think about, “How do we create value for our employees, for our customers, for our shareholders, for those who are investors?” Whatever it may be, but you can put that in any organizational context. “How do we create a difference? How do we create a better day? A better way of being? A better opportunity? How do we create value for those that we are leading?” I do think that leadership is a lot about understanding who you are and understanding how to pull people into the pursuit of something better. I think it's what leaders do, we enroll people in the pursuit of a vision that is bolder, better, more valuable, more impactful than what is currently a part of the situation.

CZ

I love that image of pulling people along rather than pushing them.

MP

Yeah, it's a powerful image. If you think about the people in your life that are the most influential, there may be moments where they have to push you along, but a lot of times they've been pulling you along. They've been coaching you, they've been asking you questions, they've been encouraging you, they've been trying to help you see the talent in yourself, and all those things are leadership qualities. People who are pushed into things often regret. There's that control piece and I think there is something to that image.

Leadership in our society is often shared from the sense of power. Maybe there's a new day coming where influence will take over power, I think it already has in terms of its actual impact in an organization or on a group of people, but I think in terms of the conversation, I hope that day is coming.

CZ

In that case, would you say that anyone can be a leader? Whether you're in a position of power or not? Or do you think that some of us are still destined to always be followers?

MP

I think everyone can be a leader and I think everyone must be a follower. I do think there are a lot of components of leadership that we all can aspire to; making a difference, serving others, putting others ahead of ourselves, thinking of servant leadership in that context. I do think everyone can be a leader. Now, not everyone is wired to be the CEO, or the governor, or whatever formal position of leadership that one might think of when they're comparing themselves when they ask that question; because what they're really asking is, "am I capable of being that?" Many of us are not going to be those roles or be taking those roles. But we may be leaders in our communities, we might be leaders in our family, in our church. How do we step up and do what needs to be done? We don't have to be the most eloquent, we don't have to be the most charismatic, we don't have to be the most visionary to be a leader. But you do have to be willing. You have to be intentional and thoughtful.

Just by definition, you don't have to be the leader of a thousand to be a leader. You lead yourself, and just a handful of other peoples in your sphere of influence, and you have to see yourself that way. You're a steward in those moments for what is entrusted to you, and that could be your family one day, it could be the people you work alongside, it could be your friend group. Whatever it may be, there are opportunities for leadership.

On the other side of that, one of the things I love also thinking about is followership. What does it mean to be a good follower? Because we're all following something. There are people we listen to, there are people we're drawn to, there are people in our lives that have incredible influence over us. There are people that if they said, "Hey, Cate, we think you should do this, we think this will be great for you," you're going to listen. Most people have those kinds of folks in their life. There are obviously people who don't and they're looking for those people, the mentors, the guides, the coaches, whatever the context may be. I do think we have to be very careful in who we follow, if we understand what leadership is. If we think about it in terms of influence, more than power, there's a lot of lessons we can learn on leadership by being a good follower.

CZ

Most people wouldn't think of being both, but you're right, you can't be the leader of everything. There are many instances where you will be a follower.

MP

We all fall in line somewhere, whether it's as a citizen, as an employee, as a member of a community organization, as a member of a church. We have to understand who we follow, and we have to think about what that looks like.

CZ

You've given a lot of great insight on what a leader might look like externally, and I'm sure many of us can identify leaders throughout history or maybe in our own lives, but another thing that you focus on a lot is leadership development. How can we be conscious of our own personal leadership development? Do you have any tips or tricks to start this process?

MP

One of the things I do with my students in class is, I ask what I hope are thoughtful questions for them to consider. It's not so much that I want them to have the answer to the question or the prompt, it's not necessarily I want them to have it all figured out. What I want them to do is think about the idea. I assign reflections. I think the idea of being reflective, and taking a few minutes to think about hard things, "Where do I stand on this?" The questions could be anything from, "What do my values mean to me? Do I consider myself courageous? Do I see value in being a person of integrity? Does it matter that I have a purpose? What is my purpose?" There are questions we can ask, especially undergrad to graduate students, and then I teach a lot of graduate students, too, that are early career folks. Like I said, I'm a student of this, I don't suggest that I have this all figured out. These are things that have helped me as I continue on that journey, being reflective and being intentional about deep things.

Another exercise that I do with students is to help them think about purpose. There is a reason we're all here, God created us to be exactly who we are and there is a giftedness in that, there are strengths in that, there are abilities in that. There are also things that we have to stretch ourselves with, but all of it is tied up in this idea of purpose. We do some different exercises to help jumpstart the conversation on having a sense of purpose.

Another exercise that I encourage students to participate in, and it's a little easier for grad students than undergrads, I'll be honest, just because of where they tend to be in life, just a little bit older, and just thinking about things a little bit differently. And that's the idea of having a vision for your life. An exercise that I do with students, and I'm not the only one who does this, I didn't come up with it, but think about your 80th birthday party. For most undergrads, they can't picture 60 years down the road, and frankly, I'm not old enough to understand what 80 is going to look like for me or even pretend to understand it. But it's a number out there that's real. Many people know people in their 80s. They know what 80 looks like, in terms of life, health and other things, the realities of life that have happened by then. What I have them think about is, "Okay, somebody is going to stand up and give a toast at your 80th birthday party. What are the stories they're going to say? What are the things they're going to talk about? What is the difference they're going to suggest that you made in their life? Who is there at the party? Who is surrounding you?" For most of us, it's not going to be our parents, because we're 80. The reality is, it's going to be the people that we meet between now and then. It's going to be, maybe, potential children or grandchildren. Are they there because they want to be there or because mom and dad made them come? It's the people you may work with. Is it going to be all the people that worked in your organization when you were the boss? Or is it going to be the people that you made a direct impact

on their life? We just talk through that, what does it look like to turn 80? There's a lot of leadership concepts and ideas there that, when we have more time to draw that out, you can really start to paint a picture and say, "Okay, if that's what I want life to look like, how am I going to live in such a way? How am I going to lead myself in such a way that that picture is attainable?"

Now, there's going to be a lot of things that happen. There's a lot of things that happen that are out of people's control, and I always make sure everybody understands that. In a lot of life, we create the results we get, a lot of it, not all of it. There's going to be things that happen, tragedies, sickness, things that are just out of our control. But at the end of a year, you look back, you think about where you started and a lot of it has to do with the decisions you made. A lot of it has to do with the choices you made. A lot of it has to do with how your words and your actions matched up with those things you say that you believe in. Which is all part of being authentic, which is all part of being a leader.

As I talk to students, as I think through things and try to think about it myself, those are just a few things I try to think about; a sense of purpose, a sense of vision for your life and what that means for how you live it out, and how you interact with those that are around you. Especially as you move into more traditional leadership roles, both in work and in life, how does that impact those that you lead on a daily basis?

CZ

That's really interesting, because I feel like the answer I was expecting was more external things, being involved or stepping up into leadership positions. But it sounds like a lot of what you've learned about is it's all internal. It's self-reflection and thinking about what we want.

MP

Yeah, well, and I should say this, there are many opportunities that those who want to develop as leaders should participate in. I was blessed in my undergrad experience to have opportunities to lead. I was a student athlete at the institution I went to, I was on the basketball team. I was one of those rare birds at that school that was involved in athletics and things like student government. There is a lot to be said about the external as well, but I do think it starts from the inside.

I am what some in leadership studies would reference as, a principles-based leadership guy. I've got these 10 or 12 principles that roll around in my mind all the time, and those are the underlying fundamentals of what I think leadership is. One of those would be what I just said, you create a lot of the results you get. I think about that all the time. When I'm dealing with a leadership problem in my day to day work, I'm like, "Where did this start? Where did this come from?" Then I look back and say, "Oh, well, I didn't do a very good job here, or I messed up here, or this came at us and we weren't ready for this." There's a piece of that that's on me. It's not just happening to me, I can't play the role of victim all the time. Sometimes things happen to me, but sometimes I wasn't paying good enough attention, or I wasn't listening.

I do think there is the internal piece, I think that's most important, then there's definitely the experiential piece in terms of how you study, think, read, observe and live out opportunities to lead. I think you have to practice being a leader. I appreciate you bringing that back up because there are moments that we can all learn from when we get out there and jump into things where we were forced to, or given the opportunity to, lead others.

CZ

Do you have any specific recommendations for those tangible resources? Maybe books or certain types of trainings?

MP

There's a lot of great books. In fact, you can go to Amazon and just put in, "leadership books," and you'll probably find at least 10 million books, and many of them are good. Many of them say a lot of the same thing. I'll just tell you about a few of my favorites. One I mentioned, and it's where I got that definition for leadership, it's "Leadership From the Inside Out," by Kevin Cashman. It's probably 10 or 12 years old now, but it's not dated in any kind of way. It talks a lot about what I just said related to understanding who you are and how that impacts your leadership.

Another great book, that even my colleagues that work here at Lipscomb with me know that I will always recommend, is a book called "Necessary Endings." It's a book by Dr. Henry Cloud, who's one of my favorite writers. Dr. Cloud talks about in that book, oftentimes for the next great thing to happen in someone's life, in their work or inside an organization, something has to end. Sometimes it's something that at once was a really good thing, but it may not be bearing the same fruit as it once did. I think so many times leaders get stuck, individuals get stuck, in decisions, they get stuck in their thinking. There are things that are in front of them that are going to be hard and challenging, and the biggest problem is, we are often very slow to let things go, to end things that need to be ended. Another book that I recommend, and by the same author, is a book called "Integrity," by Dr. Henry Cloud, and his definition of integrity is, "the courage to meet the demands of reality." There's something really profound in that, "the courage to meet the demands of reality," oftentimes a leader's toughest dilemmas are because we don't want to end something. Whether it's an employee that isn't working out, whether it's a program that is no longer relevant in the marketplace, whether it's a product in the businessplace that used to be our number one product, but now it's just not doing really well, but it ties up a lot of resources. Whatever it may be, there's a reality that we as leaders have to face. Sometimes that reality is really challenging that it needs to end.

We as leaders want to be full of vision, we want to be full of optimism, and we need to be, but in that also comes this idea that hope is forever. Oftentimes, you see organizations fail, all over this country and beyond, when they refuse to find a state of hopelessness in things that once were pretty solid. I always recommend "Necessary Endings" as a principles-based leadership guy, that idea that sometimes things

have to end for the next great thing to happen. Sometimes I'll tell students, it's not just in the business world, it's not just in employment decisions. I know people who, when they broke up with their high school sweetheart, maybe they dated all through high school, or they've been close and they thought they were going to be together forever, and I don't want to minimize that at all because sometimes it happens. Those are really, really hard endings. Maybe you go to different colleges, maybe you just move on with life, but it becomes really hard in that moment. And that's real, and it hurts, but then later on, you meet somebody else and it may be the one that you spend the rest of your life with. You look back and that was a necessary ending, even if it was a good thing. I think we have to balance it. We have to expose ourselves as leaders to those kinds of thoughts. Whether it's life in a business or an organization, or just as we lead in our families and in our relationships, in our communities, in our friend groups. It could be the habits that hold us back.

“Leadership From the Inside Out,” “Necessary Endings,” “Integrity,” there's a million others. There's some great ones just on the fundamentals of leadership; “The Truth about Leadership,” by Kouzes and Posner, “On Becoming a Leader,” by Bennis, “Leading Without Power,” by De Pree, Henri Nouwen, “In the Name of Jesus,” anything by Ken Blanchard on servant leadership or leading like Jesus, those are all great resources. I love good books, and so that's where I start. There are some great podcasts out there. Andy Stanley does a lot with leadership from a Christian perspective, and I respect a lot of what he has to say. There are a million resources.

CZ

Sounds like you take a very holistic approach to leadership, where there's that aspect of self-reflection, “What do I want my life to look like? What do I want to look back on?” But then also in accompaniment with some tangible resources, which I appreciate.

MP

It can't be something you sit around and think about. It's got to be practical in the day to day too. That's why I try to keep some of these things in my mind on the regular basis as checkpoint for me. Because if it's just something I read and highlighted a bunch of stuff in a book, I know it, but I don't do anything with it. That's the difference between knowledge and wisdom. As we try to seek wisdom as leaders, it's taking what we know and actually putting it into practice, putting it to work and making a difference with that.

When I used to do a lot more consulting, I would always ask this question, “Do your people follow you because of who you are, or because of the position you hold?” That's a hard question for some people, and it's a question I ask myself. Even here at Lipscomb, I've got four really important departments on this campus with really good people in place to lead those departments on the day to day basis. As I think about how I'm involved in that, when I send an email about this or when I go by and see somebody about that, I think about that. Do your people know you, understand your intentions, and know that you are trying to do what you think is best, not for yourself, but for others? That all comes from these kinds

of things where you develop yourself from the inside and then you educate yourself with all these external experiences, resources and things to bring it together.

CZ

Right, and you talked about authenticity earlier. That, combined with all of the things you just talked about, makes you more approachable as a leader. That trust and autonomy means a lot too for people that you are leading.

MP

Yeah, trust and approachability are huge. And it's hard, sometimes, depending on the organizational context you find yourself in. It's hard when you're in the middle of a global pandemic and you have to sit in your office a whole lot more than you anticipated. I like to be out with people. But the idea of being around, showing up, is a big leadership virtue, I think. Being there, being present, being approachable. That's why I say it's part of a journey, because what I may have been doing well at one point with this segment of the people that I think about every day, maybe the last seven, eight months, I haven't done as well about that. It's not something that I can just check off, it's something I have got to keep thinking about, and keep trying to understand.

You're right. Can people trust me? Can people approach me? Do I provide an opportunity for people to tell the truth? Do I appreciate feedback? And the answer is, I try to, I want to, and I hope so. Whether it's students who want to share what's going on, or it's people who work here at Lipscomb, or other places that I'm involved, you want to be approachable, you want to be trustworthy, and I want people to feel like they can express their concerns and that I will show empathy for that. I will try my best to not just say those things, but live it out.

CZ

Absolutely, and I'm sure the people you lead appreciate your intentionality with that.

MP

Well, I hope so. We talk about it. I think leadership's about empowerment and trust, and it's about people. As a Senior Vice President at Lipscomb, I have three very, very, very good vice presidents that report to me in the org structure, Al Sturgeon, Byron Lewis, Philip Hutcheson. They're wonderful. They don't need me to tell them how to do their jobs. My job is to help find ways to empower them and their teams to be as good as possible. They don't need me to tell them how to do Student Life. They don't need me to tell them how to do Enrollment. They don't need me to tell them how to be successful in Athletics, they don't need that. What I try to do is let them lead the way and let them lead me.

My role as a leader is to help bring about a shared sense of vision. Where are we headed? What specific direction are we headed towards? That's partly on me, it's on them too, but it's a shared sense of vision.

It's not just my ideas. It's to help them find the resources they need, whether that's people, whether that's budget dollars, whatever it may be, to bring that vision to life.

The third piece of that, that I see in my role, is to help them develop their people, to develop their teams, to encourage them to do that. Not to dictate how it's done, but to remind them to think about it. How do we help “so and so” become the best that they can be? If I try to do much more than that, it becomes a place where it could be seen as I was trying to micromanage somebody or trying to dictate, and that's not how it works. That's not how I work and that's not how I think leadership works. That's part of my personal bit, too, because there are people in leadership roles who would suggest that it is your job to micromanage and to be in the middle of all the details. That's where I differ from some other people in terms of my philosophy of leadership.

CZ

Throughout your own life and in your research, who have you identified as an influential leader? Whether that be someone you know personally or a public figure, what makes them a good leader? And how are they leading well?

MP

I've thought about that a lot. I've mentioned multiple times now that I'm a student of leadership, I observe a lot. I think the fairest way for me to give a response to that is, there are many good examples of leadership out there, but there are no perfect leaders. There are no perfect examples outside of Jesus. I mean, literally outside of Jesus, there has never been a perfect leader. Every one of us has flaws. You have to be careful if you are observing leaders, because you could be focused on becoming like that person, and remember, I think it's about being authentic.

For example, there was a great mentor in my life who I was able to spend a lot of time with, both one on one and in group settings. The way he led his teams and the way he led that organization I was always both grateful for and in awe of, because it was an organization that had a lot of challenges. It was an organization that had resource needs and it was an organization that, frankly, had a lack of vision until he came to the head of it. He taught me a lot of lessons, one on one, as I asked him questions or as he asked me questions and stretched my mind. But what I also saw in him, I could have easily wanted to be like him. In some ways, that's a good thing. There were things that he also did, or things about his personality, that I couldn't replicate.

I think there are people you put up on a pedestal naturally, the influencers in your life, maybe it's a grandparent, maybe it's a parent, maybe it's a boss, maybe it's a mentor, maybe it's a friend, maybe it's somebody like that. I don't think there's anything wrong with holding people in high esteem, but I think it can become a problem when we hold them in such esteem that we want to be like them beyond what is natural to us. Their giftedness is unique, God made them unique, just like he made me unique and you unique. We have to be thoughtful. We can have great examples of leaders, we can learn from them, but

we have to be true to ourselves. That's why you study a lot of leaders and you think about what that looks like from your perspective with your giftedness and your talents, and then your context in which you find yourself.

CZ

Dr. Paden, you've provided a lot of great insight today, and I so appreciate the chance to talk with you.

MP

Well, I appreciate the time with you too, Cate, and appreciate the conversation. I do take leadership seriously, and I do think it's important. I think everything rises and falls on leadership. When organizations struggle, there's usually a leadership component to that. An organization is really just a group of people. Whether that's the business context, or a church, or a community group, or a nonprofit, wherever you find yourself working with, anytime there are struggles, there is also some correlation to moments of leadership. This doesn't mean they all have bad leaders; it just means that there may be a moment along the way that leaders didn't do what was necessary, didn't do this, didn't do that.

But also, when organizations flourish, you can look and see moments where leaders really stood up, led, did things, made moves and created a sense of vision for what could be. I think it's really, really important. It's important for students to think about leadership, not to put pressure on themselves that, "I've got to be this," or "Do this to be a leader." No, it's just that idea of reflecting on who you are and where you're going, and being serious about it. Not being so serious that you're no fun, or anything like that, but trying to be thoughtful and intentional.

Because everywhere we go as leaders, I use the analogy in my class, every one of us leaves a wake behind us. Let's say you're going to tube behind a boat. It's a lot of fun, but, as you know, the faster that boat goes, the more directions it turns, the wake behind the boat becomes a little bit harder to navigate. Now it can be exciting at times, it can really be exciting to follow a leader who's doing lots of new and different things. It can also be exhausting, and it can be frustrating. We as people need to understand that, regardless of whether we're taking it serious or not, we as leaders, we as individuals, leave a wake behind us. We can either try to provide a great experience for those behind us, or we can not pay attention to it and create an experience that is really hard for those folks to navigate.

I do think it's important. I appreciate the conversation, and I appreciate the idea that students can learn a lot about leadership by looking from the inside and also looking to the outside for ideas, examples and experiences that can help them grow as they continue to develop as leaders.

CZ

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