

## Chapter One

# The Shepherd as Leader

The Lord is my shepherd.

There seems to be no end of books for aspiring leaders. Hundreds of new titles hit bookstores each month, and it seems as though one in ten has the word *leadership* somewhere in the title. This torrent of books brings with it at least one bit of good news: It suggests that it's possible to learn how to be a better leader. We hope to help you become a new kind of leader by offering you a new image of leadership—the leader as shepherd.

The modern leader does not lack for leadership images. We've heard the leader described as coach, cheerleader, mentor, artist, cowboy, conductor, guide, explorer, and philosopher, to name just a few. Two of the most popular images of leadership we know seem contradictory: leader as servant and leader as soldier. What gives us the right to add shepherd leader on top of this stack? After all, most people think of shepherds as either gentle young men gird in flowing robes or—worse yet—“Little Bo Peep.”

Our confidence in presenting the leader as shepherd is grounded in three observations. First, the general impression of shepherds as gentle people in lush green pastures is inadequate at best and misguided at worst. Shepherds might be gentle, but they're also tough as nails. If you have see Michelangelo's famous sculpture of David in Florence, you know the Psalmist as a man of great strength.

Second, we think the shepherd image offers a fuller picture of the life of a leader than many others. It's not that these other depictions are necessarily wrong, but we find them incomplete. Third,

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our image of the shepherd leader is grounded in and inspired by one of the greatest texts of all time: the Twenty-Third Psalm.

Psalm 23 is one of the best-known passages in the Bible. Almost everyone can quote sections of this familiar psalm due to its common usage during times of tragedy and crisis. Psalm 23 has achieved this popularity because it is both a great poem and a sacred text. As great poetry, it gives us the powerful image of a vulnerable sheep protected by a strong, loving shepherd. As a sacred text, it reminds us that there is much beyond ourselves of which to be in awe. Although it is traditionally known as a psalm of comfort, Psalm 23 could also enjoy a very different reputation as a psalm of empowerment for leaders. In fact, we want to show you how to read Psalm 23 as a poem about great leadership written from the perspective of a very satisfied follower.

King David,\* one of Israel's greatest leaders, wrote Psalm 23. Before he became king of Israel, however, David was a shepherd. In our modern age, we romanticize shepherding as a calm, peaceful activity. David, however, would have disagreed with this oversimplification. For him, shepherding was a dangerous, demanding, round-the-clock kind of job. Shepherding was also a business, and bad shepherding could ruin a family's welfare if the quality of the sheep's meat, wool, skin, or milk diminished. When viewed from this perspective, David's poem about shepherding might seem more relevant to twenty-first-century business leaders.

With this new outlook in mind, read Psalm 23 again seeking to understand it as a follower reflecting on his or her leader. Although you might know the Psalm quite well, our hope is that you're reading it now as though for the first time. Note the satisfaction in the voice of the follower. Hear the admiration the follower has for the leader. If your followers wrote a poem about you, what would it say?

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\*You will find two Davids populating this book. David, king of Israel, will most often be referred to as "the Psalmist David." David Davenport, past president of Pepperdine University, will be referred to as simply "David."

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leadeth me beside the still waters;  
He restoreth my soul.  
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me;  
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.  
Thou anointest my head with oil;  
My cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

The rest of this book is devoted to exploring the wisdom of this psalm. Every line of this sacred text can unlock new and unexpected insight on the leadership role. Before we do that, we'll give you a clear idea of what makes a shepherd leader different.

### **Shepherd Leadership in Context**

Much of our current leadership thinking and practice is rooted in the Industrial Age, and for good reason. The demands placed on us by the technological innovations fueling the Industrial Age required a new kind of leadership, and management gurus responded splendidly. Pioneering thinkers like Frederick Taylor, father of scientific management, gave America's leaders a task-oriented, machine-centered model, and the resulting productivity leaps were exponential. Administrative innovators like General Motors' Alfred Sloan perfected the multidivisional organization allowing profit-driven companies to achieve unprecedented levels of scale and scope. The new leadership paradigms of the Industrial Age worked wonders for almost three-quarters of a century before cracks started to appear.

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Despite increasing levels of both influence and affluence, critics began labeling the leadership spawned by the Industrial Age as “dehumanizing,” “mechanistic,” and “shortsighted.” One of the most influential of these voices was that of Robert Greenleaf. He responded to the problems of the Industrial Age with the idea of servant leadership in his now classic essay “The Servant as Leader.” In this and other writings, Greenleaf makes a persuasive case for the necessity of a humane servant leader in building effective organizations and societies. People quickly recognized the wisdom of Greenleaf’s writings, and the leader-as-servant image was broadly adopted as a possible cure for the ills of the Industrial Age paradigm.

Greenleaf found insight by turning the hierarchy of the Industrial Age upside down. His achievement should not surprise us since he followed one of the classic creativity techniques: reverse what you’re doing and look for insight. For example, instead of asking, “How can we make the best cup of coffee in the world?” ask “How can we make the worst cup of coffee in the world?” Or instead of asking, “How can we decrease our turnover rates?” ask “How can we triple our turnover rates?” He simply asked, “What if someone chose to be a servant first and then to be a leader?”

We agree with much of Greenleaf’s insights. Servant leadership started us down an important road, but we believe that servant leadership didn’t go far enough. Our own search for inspiration regarding new leadership models involved our reversing the timeline of history rather than the hierarchy of the organization. With Psalm 23 as our guide, we circled back around to the Agrarian Age and found a surprisingly useful model—the leader as shepherd.

In Psalm 23, the leader is a highly visible shepherd who performs the servant’s work and then some. Like servants, shepherds care for the needs of their sheep in what often seems to be a one-way relationship. Should the shepherd abdicate the servant role, the flock would quickly fall into trouble, as sheep are not known for their ability to care for their own needs. Sheep need a servant leader to find them food and water, bind their wounds, and even carry them when the going gets tough. Make no mistake, there’s plenty

of serving in the shepherd role. Yet if shepherds were only servants, the flock would quickly find itself in trouble.

Whereas servant leadership downplays hierarchy and status differences, shepherd leadership places the leader squarely at the front of the followers to serve as a role model. Maggie Lena Walker was born during Reconstruction in 1867 when African American women often found themselves working as household servants. As a member of the first generation of African Americans born into freedom, Walker chose the path of the shepherd leader rather than the role of servant. At age thirty-two, the deeply religious Walker took over an ailing insurance company with \$40 in the bank and debts of over \$400 and transformed it into a highly successful enterprise with a \$70,000 cash reserve and over 100,000 members, mostly minorities.

Before she died in 1934, Walker founded a bank, a newspaper, and a department store—all catering to the African American community in Richmond, Virginia. Her bank provided financing for homes in the black community and loans for minority-owned businesses. A revolutionary accomplishment in her day, the department store was owned by black entrepreneurs, staffed by black employees, and catered to black consumers. As a shepherd leader, Walker visibly stepped out in front, found a better path, and met the needs of her followers, never being so far out in front that she could not come alongside. Like Walker, leaders become shepherds when they awaken to the reality that their actions and decisions can improve the quality of their followers' lives forever.

### What Is a Shepherd Leader?

Shepherd leadership is whole-person leadership. It's not just a matter of thinking in a certain way or doing things in a certain way. It's a fully integrated life—a matter of head *and* hand *and* heart. We like to say that it's a way of thinking *and* doing *and* being.

First of all, shepherd leadership is a way of thinking. In the field, sheep are not famous for their strategic planning. As far as we know,

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animals do not have the capacity to visualize the future. The shepherd's first job in the field is to think and to think ahead. Although humans have this capacity, we know that not everybody uses it. For many people, the concerns of day-to-day survival often override any effort to plan for the future—despite good intentions to the contrary. This is where shepherd leadership enters the picture.

A shepherd leader is somewhat like a good travel guide. The dictionary tells us that a guide assists travel in unfamiliar territory or to an unfamiliar destination by accompanying the traveler. If you have ever enjoyed touring with a great guide, you know what a wonderful and enriching experience it can be. Somehow, without directly trying to control your every move, a good guide nevertheless empowers you to see more and learn more than would ever be possible on your own.

Shepherd leaders are characterized by mental agility. They have the ability to shift gears from deep reflection to quick thinking and decision making in a matter of moments. Most people would agree that good leaders are characterized by both kinds of thinking. Few understand how quickly actual leaders must shift between these two modes. The mind of a shepherd leader must always be out ahead, envisioning the next destination and the best way to get there. There are green fields and dangerous valleys, and the shepherd must anticipate both. In various chapters of this book, we will explore how shepherd leaders lead in right paths, prepare for the worst case, and frame a positive future.

Thinking is something a shepherd leader may often do alone. In contrast, when in the doing mode, the shepherd leader is often with others. In the field, the shepherd is out among the sheep taking care of their needs. Likewise, shepherd leaders are busy doing things for their followers. We see the shepherd leader of Psalm 23 doing something very important for his followers: cultivating abundance. If an ancient shepherd's sheep enjoyed a green pasture, it's because the shepherd had carved it out of the wilderness. Likewise when leaders provide an environment of contentment and abun-

dance, there is far more growth and progress. Shepherd leaders are also out among their followers, assessing and meeting needs. They are managing conflict and removing irritants and obstacles. Wherever there's a shepherd, there's life abundant.

Finally, shepherd leadership is a way of being. In particular, it's a way of "being with" the follower. By "being with" we mean going beyond doing things for the follower or thinking about the follower. A hallmark of shepherd leadership is both the ability and the willingness to see life from the perspective of the follower. Psalm 23 is a powerful demonstration of David's ability to see life from the perspective of a follower.

It would be shortsighted to think of the shepherd-sheep relationship as a one-sided deal for the shepherd. In reality, the shepherd and the sheep had a mutually beneficial relationship. The sheep enjoyed a longer, healthier life under the protection of the shepherd. Likewise, the shepherd enjoyed a longer, healthier life because of the sheep, which provided him with a ready source of warm clothing and relieved him of the obligation to hunt for all of his food. Historians contend that sheep would have long ago become extinct had it not been for their willingness to become domesticated in the care of shepherds. Many ancient civilizations revolved around the relationship between humans and sheep. In those days, sheep were not regarded as "dumb animals" but were held in very high esteem.

Shepherd leaders are distinctive in that while thinking ahead, they are very much "with" the sheep. Shepherding is not a remote form of leadership; it is high touch. Shepherds do not issue a lot of memos and orders from the corner office; rather, they get out in the field to model and guide. Chapters on how shepherd leaders are present with their flock, lead immortals, cultivate loyalty, and become both leader and follower elaborate on this important dimension of leadership.

