

## BOOK REVIEW

# The Way of the Shepherd: 7 Ancient Secrets to Managing Productive People

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W. CALVIN FIELDS

Wingate University  
cfields@wingate.edu

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I picked up this book at the San Antonio CBFA meeting on a whim. When I first saw the book, I thought oh, well, another tired old treatise on leadership. What I later realized is that it was anything but that. The book is a refreshing look at leadership through an allegory. One will still see some similarity with typical “principles” of management books, but the author’s method is so unique that the book breathes new life into the meaning of leadership and management. Frankly, the book impacted me personally more than any other book short of the Bible.

This non-fiction work tells a story about an interview by one of the book’s two authors, William Pentak. The interviewee is the CEO of General Technologies, Theodore McBride. It is during the interview that the reader discovers this is no ordinary book on leadership, and the insights contained in this very pleasant little book are taught in no ordinary fashion, as you will discover. The book retails for \$14.99 in the United States.

Leman and Pentak (2004) is appropriate as either an optional or required reading in an MBA leadership course or organizational behavior course, but would be just as appropriate in an undergraduate leadership, organizational behavior, or principles of management course as a primary or required secondary text. The book is so small (7.25 by 5 inches) and short (117 pages, plus a 2-page notes section. It also has a small bibliography section), that it can be read in one day. I read most of it on the plane coming back to Charlotte from San Antonio.

As I began reading in my hotel, I realized the book was a story about the insights gained from a successful leader’s experiences; not experience in the workplace per se, but about experience learned from a sheep rancher in the Texas hill country. For those not familiar with that area, the hill country is found around Austin and San Antonio. The

story is told by the head of General Technologies, Theodore McBride, of when he was an MBA student at the University of Texas in Austin, the capitol city. The stage is set when Mr. McBride explains the circumstances of landing his first job (the year was 1957). After he won this first job as financial manager, he went back to one of his former professors, Dr. Jack Neumann, for advice on how to manage a finance department. You see, the authors make clear from the outset, Ted McBride was a whiz at finance as the MBA student but didn’t have a clue about how to manage employees. It is here that the story really begins, as Dr. Neumann, the new fledgling’s most admired former professor, tells and shows his student about how to properly raise sheep. It is with the pedagogy of allegory that the reader learns the “7 Ancient Secrets to Managing Productive People.” If you’re like me, you won’t be able to put it down once you’ve started.

Storytelling is probably the oldest pedagogical tool know to mankind. It has been used to hand down knowledge from generation to generation for probably thousands of years. Certainly, we know that Christ used storytelling frequently, in the form of parables. We also know that he chose parables and allegories to convey lessons rich with meaning to those who would listen. I use storytelling as a teaching tool as well, but it seems to work best with MBA students for some reason unknown to me. (A case study analysis accomplishes much the same thing since it tells a story.) It is a great way to illustrate an abstract idea, and it is an especially effective method in the mentoring relationship exemplified in this book. Perhaps it’s the richness of the communication medium (Daft and Lengel, 1984) or maybe because a story is perceived to be especially vivid or concrete (Richardson, 1969). Regardless of the particular psychological mechanism, if Jesus used it, it works, and we

should make more use of it in the classroom as this book implies.

There is much more to the book than a very interesting story. The book also illustrates the power of mentorship in shaping lives. The young Mr. McBride gets into the professor's pickup after accepting the invitation to learn how to manage people, not knowing what he was getting into. Certainly, the book highlights the utility and relevance of experiential learning since the management and leadership lessons are learned on a sheep ranch.

Hmmm...yes, Jesus did that too, didn't he? He would take his disciples on trips down unknown roads to unexpected places. He provided a sense of suspense and surprise, even anxiety, to his followers. That is the same experience that this future CEO had with his professor, and it can be the same with some, perhaps many, of our own students.

Each of the seven secrets is given a separate chapter. At the end of each chapter, the student's insights are summarized. At the end of the book, all seven secrets are listed with handy notes for each. It wouldn't be a bad idea to photocopy them for a place on an office wall. The first secret turns out to be "Know the Condition of Your Flock."

One of the first things we learn about teaching is from the reaction of the young Mr. McBride to the unexpected visit to the dirty, smelly sheep ranch. Some might say that the sheep metaphor is not apt in this day and time, but a case can be made that this novel metaphor shifts attention to new, interesting insights about management and leadership. He hadn't expected to learn about leadership and management at a sheep ranch. The student had come with assumptions and expectations about what it meant to manage employees, not sheep. He was shocked at the unique teaching method used by Dr. Neumann. For example, we find a young Mr. McBride who impatiently wonders when the learning about managing people was to begin. As the mentor, Dr. Neumann replies, "We already have, and they're not a bunch of smelly sheep" (p. 23). In other words, real teaching and learning were already occurring in the field that confronted the student's preconceptions.

This reminds me of an exercise I use in my Principles of Management course, using an exercise from Griffin's (2006; 315-316) textbook, which illustrates the influence of underlying stereotypes in the personnel selection process. A variety of individual applicant descriptions are given, and student teams are instructed to match each applicant's description with the job he should perform. Of course, virtually none of the chosen matches are correct, proving the teaching point that prior assumptions are often incorrect. Chapter one of *The Way of the Shepherd*, which

highlights the difficulty of faulty expectations noted above, could be used to reinforce the notion in lecture that fair and objective personnel selection is a skill that must be learned. The connection to expectancy theory is evident. Employees may have expectations that are off-base. Student expectations may also be misguided. A good shepherd manager, or teacher, will frequently communicate expectations so subordinates will be clear on what is expected of them.

Once things get underway in the book, a very important point is stated by the professor:

"A manager can't manage what he doesn't know" (p. 25). In this, Dr. Neumann points out that we must first discover subordinates' (i.e., students') unique personal needs so that we may shepherd each one individually. Only after we know each individual need, will students be most receptive and want to know more. In other words, take a sincere interest in our students as Christ, the Shepherd, exemplified. That mentoring relationship will lay a foundation for better student learning. But first, common misconceptions have to be dispelled.

Management literature does not focus on the issue of genuine human caring. Perhaps it does not sound scientific enough. Pages 26-28 explain how managers can fully motivate their subordinates to want to follow and perform by showing each individual employee how much for which he or she is cared.

Perhaps chapter 2 should have been the first chapter because this chapter focuses on the notions of recruitment, selection, and placement of personnel. In this chapter, the wise, old Dr. Neumann, by now an acknowledged and better appreciated mentor to the young McBride, describes his personal model of human resources management. The model is captured by Dr. Neumann's acronym SHAPE: (1) strengths, (2) heart, (3) attitude, (4) personality, and (5) experiences, as described by Leman and Pentak. (The acronym is a handy little device that makes this lesson easier to teach, as well as recall.) To illustrate how his model works, the professor takes his understudy to a sheep auction. There, he learns how to select the best sheep. The book does not shy away from the issue of termination either. If a sheep has a bad attitude, or is not teachable, he or she must be resold at auction in order to protect the remaining stock.

When I use this book in lectures, I go back and forth, comparing and contrasting a good shepherd's way of managing and leading with the way of the secular humanism. This method surprises some students, but catches the interest and attention of all students. I believe it helps remove the varnish over the truth so students can gain greater insights into

what managing and leading are really all about: People. Besides, it makes teaching more interesting, challenging, and rewarding, if not more effective.

Chapter 3 explores the idea of follower's identification with their leader. For example, the authors provide a notable quote from Dr. Neumann:

“Great leaders instill a sense of meaning and belonging in their followers by putting the personal imprint of who they are and what they stand for on their people” (p. 45).

This notion is taught via an episode where Mr. McBride is instructed to place an identification tag in a sheep's ear that is new to the flock. After hesitating, knowing full well that tagging the ewe's ear would cause pain; he finally does tag the animal. The illustration is carried further to show that the ewe can trust her shepherd even after he has inflicted pain on her; pain that was necessary to mark the sheep with the common identity of the flock. Great leaders take personal interest in their followers even if they must inflict some pain. Certainly Jesus did not promise us a pain-free walk with him. The Bible is full of references to suffering followers. Actually, pain in the Christian's life is often a good thing (Heb. 12:10-11), since it enables an ever closer walk with the leader, Christ himself.

Chapter 4, “Make Your Pasture a Safe Place,” is an object lesson. Dr. Neumann surprises his protégé when he drives up in a 1957 Corvette, which would have been new at that time, and they drive out to another rancher's flock to show how run-down the sheep are. It is obvious that the neighboring rancher's sheep have not received the necessary medical care. He uses this example to teach about managing employee relations, especially the chronic problem of anxiety from fear of neglect or of being fired. The authors let Dr. Neumann teach us to make sure our employees feel secure, for example, by continually sharing information with subordinates. That way, uncertainty is reduced and employees are less distracted by apprehension.

To give you some idea how this is conveyed in the book, Dr. Neumann shows his apprentice how the other rancher's sheep did not want to lay down to get enough sleep because they were afraid of being attacked by predators. They stood up night and day, being continually vigilant. As a result, the sheep became exhausted. A good shepherd protects his sheep. A good leader defends his flock's safety (i.e., department), even takes the blame, as Christ did. The subordinates of a good shepherd do not worry so much about getting fired, nor do they look for greener pastures. Likewise, the Lord gives assurances of rest

(Hebrews 4).

The most interesting chapters for me were chapters 3 and 4 because the issue of trust undergirds all human relationships. The closest principle to trust in the management literature is that of participative management. The premise of participative management is that if one is given a say in planning, eventual acceptance will be better, leading to greater employee commitment and motivation. But, participative management cannot work if there is no trust. Trust is a prerequisite for participative management.

Being transparent is also necessary. There will always be some students who do not like who we are or what is being taught, but, they will usually give us respect and an honest hearing if we level with them. Personally, I develop trust by first breaking the ice with humor. I am certainly no comedian, nor do I aspire to become one, but I have found through years of experimentation that humor is a very effective classroom tool. I may fall on my face the first attempt, but I eventually figure an angle to build on. Successful humor sends the message to students that the professor has come down off his high horse, and then they can begin to trust and learn. They also begin to participate more in class since their natural anxiety has been relieved. Strategic humor is but one angle to break the ice toward building trust.

The next chapter focuses on leadership per se, consistent with the book's dust cover. The cover shows a man dressed in a suit holding a 200 year old staff. Under his arm is a copy of *The Wall Street Journal*. It is in this chapter that the authors tell how Dr. Neumann instructed his student how to gently lead with the staff. The staff of the shepherd has four functions according to Leman and Pentak's telling of Dr. Neumann's teaching: (1) directing (2) setting and maintaining boundaries, (3) rescuing sheep from danger, and (4) encouraging. In other words, a gentle reminder keeps employees going in the right direction, we might assume like the Holy Spirit. Rules and policies (i.e., boundaries) are clarified and enforced in a loving way. Troubled employees are counseled, therefore, protected. Employees are encouraged by great leaders, not punished. In short, a manager should lead in a fashion that identifies and addresses employee boundary violations early, before that employee gets lost. Likewise, the Holy Spirit prompts immediately, and provides warm encouragement. A good leader or manager does the same. Psalm 23:4 tells us that a shepherd's staff is a source of security and comfort to sheep.

Personnel management policy typically requires employee reviews on some fixed schedule, such as annually, biannually, every quarter, etc. But, according to *The Way of the Shepherd*, personnel reviews should occur as needed.

Managers need to talk informally with their subordinates, and chapter 5 teaches that we need to communicate more frequently with our students about their performance.

If chapter five is about the staff, what do you think chapter six is about? Sometimes, it is important to use a tool of discipline to correct a member of the flock. The authors begin by giving a historical background of the rod, explaining that it is thrown at a predator to scare it off, or thrown near a sheep to bring it back to the flock. Professor Neumann explains to his student that employee discipline is not done to punish, but to redirect an employee away from something that might be harmful. As the authors explain through the professor, employee discipline is done best from the perspective of teacher and learner. The supervisor disciplines by teaching because the goal is to prevent subordinates from making errors and only one who can see better what potential harm lies ahead, such as a shepherd, can teach this lesson. The point is to work closely with subordinates with an attitude toward continual training and development. Wasn't that Jesus' approach? He knew much more about what was ahead of his disciples, and the whole world for that matter, and he warned, challenged, and developed his disciples continually, not at the end of the year after it was too late.

An effective CEO is able to turn around a failing company because he or she knows the painful choice necessary to succeed and is willing to make the hard choices to bring about big changes, even as he or she takes greater personal risks. Likewise, we as teachers have seen students succeed and fail. We have seen the same mistakes made each semester by our students and that is to be expected because some concepts and/or skills are just harder to acquire. We already know the most likely mistakes. Therefore, just as good managers who can see well ahead of his or her subordinates, we can warn students what to watch out for to avoid a negative situation. This focus works especially well when teaching a strategic simulation. In our strategic management course, students run a simulated manufacturing company for "eight years." During the course, some student management teams will get an unexpected, high-interest loan. Once this happens, students know that the instructor can see beyond their sight because they recall that they were already warned about this possibility. The result of the unwelcome loan: students start asking a lot more questions and learning more. They also now know that the shepherd-teacher allows pain only to teach them important lessons. Genuine trust is strengthened.

Chapter 7 concludes the lessons Dr. Neumann models to his protégé, Ted McBride. The last lesson is that being a leader with a shepherd's worldview is expensive, not for the

flock, but for the shepherd-leader. In the language of the world, the chapter might be considered a disclaimer. In the language of Christ, it is meant to warn of the high cost of being a great leader (Luke 14: 25-35). As a way to end their student-teacher relationship, Dr. Neumann has Mr. McBride over to his home for dinner. As they sit on his veranda, the professor gives his student one last lesson, a final lesson we should all heed if we are educators:

"What makes a shepherd a shepherd isn't the staff or the rod; it's the heart. What distinguishes a greater leader from a mediocre one is that a great leader has a heart for his people" (p. 101).

Certainly, something so subjective as the heart is not a hot topic among management principles, but heart is still an important issue, nevertheless. Dr. Neumann concludes with a demonstration of his heart for his flock. He calls his sheep to come near him. All his sheep quickly respond. Then, Mr. McBride gives the same call, but no sheep respond. Because a leader sincerely loves his sheep, the flock is loyal, but building love and trust takes time. Without a loving, heart-felt relationship, the sheep do not follow. Remember, Christ's sheep know him by his voice (John 10). The issue is a challenging one to business educators as well as to those who espouse to lead in business: Truly effective leadership requires genuine love and personal sacrifice for the sake of the flock. Nothing else can substitute. As it was with Christ, the greatest leader, it still is today, for those who are shepherd-leaders.

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