

# Five Core Qualities Of Ladder Holders

If I'm climbing, I want to be sure that my supporters know what I'm trying to do when I'm alone at the top with my paint buckets, brushes, and scrapers. Do those at the ground understand what I'm trying to accomplish? Do they realize that I can't paint over cracked paint because I must first chip away the old? Or do they get impatient and yell, "Just put a fresh coat over the old stuff"?

I also want to make this clear: Those who are

## CHAPTER THREE

gripping the ladder don't have to agree with my tactics or methods. They do, however, need to understand where I want to go even if they would have taken a different route. They do have to believe in my vision and agree with where I'm going.

But what if they don't have the vision? What if ***Those who are gripping the ladder don't have to agree with my tactics or methods. They do have to believe in my vision and agree with where I'm going.*** they don't have any idea where I'm going? How much will I be able to depend on them and their commitment to my vision?

For example, let's say I visit Joyful Tidings Church next Sunday morning and they have 100 people in the worship service. I wait outside until church service is over. I hold a tape recorder in my hand. As each person steps forward I ask, "What's the vision of this church?"

How many answers will I get? Could I count on twenty people out of the hundred to give me the same answer? I don't mean a memorized statement or something simplistic such as "Our vision is to save souls." The church may not have an evangelistic program and no one has joined the church in two years, but is that still the vision? Not likely.

What happens at Joyful Tidings Church when I ask? If they don't know the vision, how can they be in tune with the pastor? They may love the pastor and nod appreciatively at the sermons every week. They may enjoy the music program and feel inspired by

FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

the worship. But that's still moving in the realm of projects. The sermon is a project; the music is a project. *What is the vision?*

Because I raised that issue myself several times, I started asking myself a question. *If I had to find a ladder holder what core qualities would I seek?* What would they have to have for me to consider them as class A, number one, top-notch, eagle, ladder holders?

I came up with five qualities I'd insist on. There are others I'd like to see and that I would hope for. But these are the essentials for ladder holders.

**The first quality is *strength*.** They have to be strong. By that, I mean they must be people who can handle instruction and criticism, with whom I can use plain language and not have to walk on eggshells and fix things for them. That means that if they need to be corrected in certain areas they can change them without my having to worry about how much I'm going to hurt their feelings.

I'm not referring to being crass, rude, arrogant, or obnoxious. For example, let's focus on the person running the sound system. Last Sunday morning the sound system reverberated at times and caused me to shudder. At other times, the amplification was so low that people strained to hear what I said.

I don't want excuses or lengthy explanation, and this is more important than whether the sound engineer slept well the night before. This is ministry—service—to the body of Jesus Christ.

"The sound wasn't right," I need to be able to say

## CHAPTER THREE

and then add, "Do whatever you have to do to make it happen. People can't worship when they have to clamp their hands over their ears."

I expect the sound engineer to know how to take care of those things. When I speak that way, I'm not trying to hurt feelings; I'm just conducting business.

In the church, however, we know that some members are so fragile we can hardly correct them without their getting upset. "I'm doing my best, you know," they may say. "Why are you always picking on me? Why don't you like me? Why do you find fault with everything I do?"

We need strong ladder holders—those strong enough to take criticism and who want to do better.

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To use the ladder image again, I can't be sixty feet in the air and have to yell down to remedy the mistakes my holder is making. I need someone strong enough to do the task right and to be secure enough that I can yell down instructions and know

the person will listen.

Another way I explain this is to say, "The greater the need, the shorter the prayer." If I were drowning I wouldn't say, "Oh God, The Everlasting Father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Almighty One who was, is, and ever shall be, hallowed be thy name, seeth thou that I drownest? Throwest me a rope that I may cling to safely even as I am always safe in the old rugged cross."

#### FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

No, I'm going to scream, "Help, God!" I won't worry about whether I addressed the entire Trinity or only Jesus. I won't be concerned about whether I concluded with "In Jesus' Name Amen." I'm too busy trying to stay alive!

Hence, the greater the need, the shorter the prayer. And when I'm up there on a forty-foot ladder the need is great. It's not an option—I must have people holding the ladder who can handle instructions in two to three words and be able to do it quickly.

**The second quality is *attentiveness*.** They need to be able to pay attention, be alert to what I'm saying and absorb it quickly. I don't want to give them the same lessons repeatedly.

Can't we assume that if James and Martha have been ushering for twenty-seven years, they ought to know what they're supposed to do? Those who clean the church ought to know where every wastebasket is. Those who sing in the choir ought to know the time they're supposed to be there to rehearse on Wednesday night and what time they're expected to be in their robes on Sunday morning.

We don't have to chase after attentive people repeatedly. They understand the first time.

**The third quality is *faithfulness*.** I'm not referring to having faith in the Lord. That's assumed if they're going to serve in the church. I'm talking about having faith in me as their leader and being committed to me.

I learned very early in my own ministry that if they aren't faithful to me—if they aren't committed

## CHAPTER THREE

to the same vision I am—they'll abandon me. The worst thing is that they run away, not before I start and not when I explain what I want. They nod, smile, and agree, but as soon as I'm fifteen feet away, they abandon me.

I need people who remain at the ladder no matter how difficult things become. As long as I'm up there, the faithful show me that I can be assured they're down below. They don't need my constantly yelling down, "You're doing a great job. You're wonderful." They're steady and I know I can count on them.

**The fourth quality is *firmness*.** By that I mean not exploited by manipulative people. In every church and in every corporation there are manipulative types. Al Qaeda terrorists aren't new—only the name. Terrorism in the church is nothing new, but it's usually cloaked in ecclesiastical language, hidden in the by-laws, or made to sound spiritual and appealing. The ultimate goal of church terrorists is control and destruction. That sounds harsh, I'm sure, but that's what they're after.

They may speak in pious language such as, "The Holy Spirit led me," or say, "The Lord spoke to my heart." They may be extremely self-deceived or just mean spirited. It doesn't matter which because the end is the same. They want to destroy the present plans and operations. They do it in so many ways, but the one I've noticed most often is what I call *seductive manipulation*.

An illustration may help—and it's an embarrassing one at that. My first serious awareness of

FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

seductive manipulation came about when I was a twenty-six-year-old assistant pastor of a church in Oregon. A few of the leaders began to call me aside. They flattered me and told me how much they admired my ministry and loved my commitment.

"You know, we really enjoy it when you preach. When you're in the pulpit we get something out of the service," they would say and throw their arms around me. "We wish you could preach every Sunday and every Tuesday."

Until then I had never thought of such a thing. I had come to assist the senior pastor.

"You feed us when you preach or teach. You're anointed and you understand. The pastor just doesn't speak to us. His messages are all right, but they're just not relevant to our needs."

This kind of conversation didn't happen just once, but over a period of weeks. I was young, naïve, and egocentric. Very stupidly, I allowed them to manipulate me by their constant ego stroking. Instead of being the faithful ladder holder I should have been I started enjoying those conversations. At first, I listened and thanked them. When I walked away, I'd feel really special and anointed.

It wasn't long before I participated in the conversations. "You're right. He just doesn't understand the needs of people today."

I still remember at a business meeting where there was a particularly important item on the agenda. Several of the elders—the ones who had been stroking my ego—had convinced me that the plan the

### CHAPTER THREE

pastor wanted to put into action was unwise. He spoke and explained exactly what he wanted to see happen.

"May I say something?" I asked. When the pastor nodded, I stood up. I strongly disagreed with everything he had said. Point by point, I argued against what he wanted done. My seductive manipulators had done a good job on me.

I was wrong. I think I knew that thirty seconds after I began to speak. However, I didn't know how to back down and say, "I'm sorry." My words carried, and we vetoed something the pastor was committed to. I should have been his senior ladder holder and I had not only waffled, but I had worked against him. I wasn't the firm assistant he deserved.

God has a way of evening things out. The following year when I was a pastor in Michigan, I reaped the fruit of the bad seed I had sown in Oregon. I was then the senior pastor and the same type of seductive manipulators moved in on my territory.

Through that sad experience, I learned three important lessons:

1. If we disagree with our leader we don't do so publicly. We need to discuss it with that person in private.
2. If we disagree, we ought to search our motives before we speak. We need to be sure that others don't set us up. They won't speak up themselves, but they will find naïve and trusting souls to do the work for them.
3. If we disagree, we should be sure we don't do it

FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

for personal gain. I didn't get it at the time, but those manipulators had instilled a desire in me to become the senior pastor. Because of them, I coveted a position that God had not called me to.

As I've thought with much shame about my behavior in Oregon, I realized—too late—that my agenda was not that I disagreed and wanted to express my viewpoint. My secret agenda was that I wanted to look smarter, brighter, and better informed than the senior pastor. Those seductive manipulators were using me—just as Satan used Eve in the Garden of Eden. And just like Eve, I was too naïve to realize what was going on—until it was too late.

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**The final quality is *loyalty*.** I

do not mean they must agree all the time. Loyalty doesn't mean repeating, "Yes, yes, yes," no matter what the visionary says.

I have formulated three sentences that explain what I mean.

1. You may disagree with my head but not my heart.
2. You may disagree with how I do things but not why I do things.
3. You may disagree with my methods but not my motivations.

CHAPTER THREE

**PASTOR OR CEO**

When I first went to Beulah Heights Bible

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*The five essential qualities we seek:*

**1. Strength.** *They have to be people who can handle instruction and criticism.*

**2. Attentiveness.** *They ought to be alert to what I'm saying and absorb it quickly. I don't want to give them the same lessons repeatedly.*

**3. Faithfulness.** *They must have faith in me as their leader and be committed to me. If they aren't faithful to me—if they aren't committed to the same vision I am—they'll abandon me*

**4. Firmness.** *Manipulative people won't be able to exploit them.*

**5. Loyalty.** *They don't always have to agree, but (1) They may disagree with my head but not my heart. (2) They may disagree with how I do things but not why I do things. (3) They may disagree with my methods but not my motivations.*

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College as president in 1989, I didn't have a background in human resources. We had seven people on our staff at that time—four of them part time and three full time. (Fourteen years later, we had more than ninety people on staff.) Over the years I've learned a few lessons about ladder holders that might be helpful to those who hire and fire.

Although my experience has been largely with personnel at Beulah Heights Bible College, these principles carry through in pastoral situations as well. Almost any week in the year, I have conversations with pastors who have problems with paid staff. They have a difficult job today. On one hand, they are pastors—that means they're shepherds who care for the sheep. On the other hand, they are the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and the congregation holds them responsible for the

smooth running business of the church.

FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

The first thing I've learned is that even though they are both pastor and CEO, they can't be both at the same time. I try to help them understand the difference between the two and when to give priority to one and when to the other.

It may help if I explain it this way. Let's say I'm the senior minister at First Spiritual Church. To every paid staff member, I am the CEO first and the pastor second. That means I must first do the business of the church with them.

***Even though they are both pastor and CEO, they can't be both at the same time.***

When I have accomplished that, I can function as their pastor. If I get the order wrong, I am in trouble and so is the organization.

To every church member, I am the pastor first and the CEO second. I must be able to reach out to them as those who need to be nurtured, strengthened, encouraged, rebuked, and disciplined. When I've performed my pastoral duties, I can function as the CEO. If I get this wrong, then it's back to the matter of putting projects before people. If I see the members only as the means to accomplish what I want done, then I'll manipulate, threaten, coerce, or flatter them into fulfilling my agenda.

When I function as CEO with paid employees, the first lesson we learned is that we hire people for *what* they know; we fire them for *who* they are.

We may hire the musician because she can make the simplest music sound like a concerto in every piece she plays. We fire her because she has a bad

## CHAPTER THREE

attitude. We hire an office manager because he is a computer whiz and understands spreadsheets, profit and loss, government regulations, and knows all the latest software. We fire him because he can't get along with people.

What do we do when it's time to put someone on staff? My suggestion is that we need to re-think our policy. We want competent people, obviously. But when we select ladder holders, we need to spend more time with *who* they are rather than *what* they know.

I can read their resumé's and I can talk to people they've worked for and with. That is important. But

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I also know that troubles in the job usually start over personality issues and not over competency. Once hired, they will give me joy or grief. With few exceptions, the people I have fired I have terminated

because of their attitudes. Rarely have I had to get rid of someone for lack of ability to do the job.

This leads me to the second lesson I've learned: *Hire slowly and fire quickly.*

It's better to have a vacancy than to have bad help. Suppose the doctor diagnoses you with cancer, says surgery is the only option, and asks, "When would you want it scheduled?"

I'm guessing you'll say, "As soon as possible."

As a leader, a good question to ask ourselves is this, Why do I tolerate incompetent staff? Why do I allow them to infect the rest of the staff with their

FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

bad attitude? Here is the way I like to say it: Don't rush hiring decisions; don't delay firing decisions.

The third lesson I've learned is this: *The best time to fire somebody is the first time it goes through your head.*

We tend to get our roles confused again here. Instead of thinking as a CEO and for the good of the organization, we tend to switch to our pastoral role and figure out ways to excuse or overlook problems serious enough that we'd consider terminating them.

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I've also learned that if the situation is serious enough to fire people and we don't, after that we begin to search for reasons to keep them.

About the time I figured out this third lesson, I spotted an advertisement in *USA Today*<sup>1</sup> by Randall Murphy, the founder and president of the Acclivus Corporation. I don't know much about Acclivus except that their clients include major organizations such as Dunn and Bradstreet, Exxon, Mobile, Dell, FedEx, Dr. Pepper/Seven-Up and Roadway Express. The ad read: "When you are assigned the task of taking the hill—or the market—you are less concerned about who is *for* you and more concerned about who is *with* you."

Those words impacted me and I read the sentence several times. I've translated Murphy's statement into the business of the church such as when a congregation starts a new building program.

## CHAPTER THREE

Those who make pledges are *for* us; those who pay their pledges are *with* us. We don't have to be involved with churches very long before we recognize that there is a large gap between those two groups.

Just because people say, "I'm for you," that isn't the real issue. The real issue is what happens in their lives. Do they do what they promise? Do they faithfully follow their words by their actions?

**THREE LEVELS OF LADDER HOLDERS**

I've already mentioned the five things we have to watch for that tell us who those ladder holders are.

***The best time to fire somebody is the first time it goes through your head... If the situation is serious enough to fire people and we don't, we begin to search for reasons to keep them.***

From there, I started thinking about what happens with ladder holders in a church.

I concluded that there are three levels of ladder holders.

First, there are the *followers*. This word can refer to everybody in the congregation.

Second are the *ministers*. They feel God has called them, empowered them, and gifted them to serve in the church.

When I use the word minister, I don't mean ordained ministers and pastors, although it may include them—I refer to all of those who have a heart to serve others.

Third are *leaders*. They minister through others. They don't have only a sense of calling; they also

## FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

have passion—and that passion is to see God work through others. True leaders don't try to deceive themselves into thinking they can or even want to do everything. They're willing to empower and trust others. Ministers do service primarily by themselves; leaders do service through others.

Throughout my years of serving in the church, we have ruined many good ministers by shoving them into leadership. Here's an example of what I mean. Let's say that Josh has a passion for doing prison ministry. He's also gifted because he knows how to connect with the incarcerated. They listen to him because they trust him. On his own and without anyone from the church behind him, Josh goes to the local jail every Friday and Saturday. He does this out of concern and love. He carries Gospel portions with him and teaches prisoners how to read the New Testament. He sings, he preaches, and he takes time to counsel with anyone who asks him to.

After two years, Josh has an amazing array of results, such as several people believing in Jesus Christ. Some of them have joined the church. Everyone recognizes the value of Josh's ministry.

One day the pastor says, "We need to start an official prison ministry through our church. Josh is already doing it, so let's put him in charge."

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CHAPTER THREE

"Every time we take prayer requests," an elder says, "Josh asks us to pray for the prison ministry and the prisoners."

"He regularly sends e-mails about the people who got saved," says a deacon.

"He's passionate about it," says one.

The board agrees unanimously.

That decision may sound like a good idea, but in

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***There are three levels of ladder holders***

- 1. Followers. This word can refer to everybody in the congregation.***
  - 2. Ministers. They feel God has called them, empowered them, and gifted them to serve.***
  - 3. Leaders. They minister through others.***
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the ten minutes they took to make that official verdict, they ruined Josh and his ministry.

Until then, Josh had been an excellent minister for God. He did an outstanding job as long as he was the only one who did the work. He has a tender heart and people instinctively trust him.

Yet his ministry has been ruined, because Josh has moved from ministry to leadership. He's no longer person-centered. He's overwhelmed with recruiting musicians and evangelists. He's constantly scheduling who will go to which jail and at what

time. He must spend an immense amount of time teaching those who have volunteered for ministry. They need to understand appropriate behavior and what they can and can't do for the prisoners. He has to explain, for instance, that they can't carry mail in or out for those incarcerated. They can't give advice,

#### FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

especially not legal advice. Several times he has had to go to the sheriff and apologize for mistakes his people make.

After four months, Josh realizes that he has to manage and lead people. He no longer has a ministry. His passion starts to dry up. The well-meaning church board has ruined him. He's pouring his efforts into holding the ladder for others and he needs to be climbing his own ladder.

This comes down to saying that even though someone like Josh is doing an exemplary ministry, it doesn't mean he can function well as a good ladder holder.

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#### TRAINING LADDER HOLDERS

This leads me to emphasize that ladder holders need to be *trained*. Very few ministers have qualified and trained ladder holders. I've held conversations with pastors of large churches all over this country. I point out the qualities I've already mentioned. They need people who are strong, attentive, faithful, firm, and loyal.

Then I say, "Name your ladder holders. I'm not asking for positions and titles such as deacons or trustees. Think about those five qualities I gave you." I pause and then say, "Tell me the names of your ladder holders."

CHAPTER THREE

No matter how many times I've done this, the highest anybody has been able to name is five. The size of the congregation doesn't seem to matter, whether it's a church of 100 members or one with more than 10,000.

When the pastors can't get beyond a few names, it tells me that the church has done an excellent job of raising followers but has been abysmal about doing leadership development.

At the beginning of this book, I mentioned that developing people takes time, and time is one thing

we don't have in our busy lives.

***Ladder holders  
need to be trained.***

I also remind pastors that their armor bearers or assistants may not necessarily be ladder

holders. Just because somebody is an assistant pastor, assistant choir director, vice president of the corporation, or has an impressive title doesn't make him or her a trusted ladder holder.

To make this clear, I try to get pastors to think of situations when the church is filled with problems and ask, "To whom would you turn for help?"

They still stare at me in confusion, so here's an illustration that has seemed to make clear what I mean.

"Let's say you are marooned on an island. The battery on your cell phone is running low. You decide you have just enough juice to make one call. Let's also say that you know that no member of your family is available." Then I pause and ask, "Whom will you call?"

FIVE CORE QUALITIES OF LADDER HOLDERS

They easily eliminate the ones they wouldn't call, and some of them are prominent in the church. They finally realize that they need to call a true ladder holder—a person who is faithful and someone who is committed to them personally. Those are the individuals who will do whatever necessary to get them off the island.

***"When you are assigned the task of taking the hill—or the market—you are less concerned about who is for you and more concerned about who is with you."***

*If you were marooned on that island, who is the ladder holder you'd call?*