

How Do You Flatten the Hierarchy?

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Jesus said that we should not lord it over others and exercise authority over others. Instead, we should *serve* others. Bible scholars and Christian writers have concluded that Jesus wants us to flatten and even eliminate hierarchies.

So how do you lead an organization with a flat hierarchy, or no hierarchy at all? This essay will review what Jesus said, and suggest some practical ways to flatten the hierarchy with networks of love, chains of coaching, and teams.

The Scriptural basis

Many people know that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, a very humble act that turned the social hierarchy upside down. Fewer people seem to be aware of the strong anti-hierarchical statements of Jesus, which can be found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels.

Scholars assume that the Gospel of Mark was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written. The story in Mark is that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asked Jesus if they could sit at his right and left when he came into his glory. They were asking, in short, to be above the other disciples. When the other ten disciples heard about this, they were indignant. At Mark 10:42-45 we read:

Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

This passage is repeated in almost identical language in Matthew 20:25-28. The difference in the context is that this time, it was not James and John who asked to sit at the right and left of Christ in his kingdom, it was their mother who asked on their behalf. Again:

Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

The setting and the language in the Gospel of Luke is different, but the message is the same. The scene is the Last Supper. A dispute broke out among the disciples regarding which of them was the greatest. At Luke 22:25-28 we read:

Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.’

Scholars and Christian writers

N. T. Wright is one of the most respected Bible scholars in the world today. In his book, *How God Became King*, he argued that this teaching of Christ about servanthood is a key teaching. He wrote: “Jesus contrasts the normal practice of pagan rulers with his own vision of power and prestige: ‘Anyone who wants to be great among you must become your servant.’ This is at the center of his vision of the kingdom.”¹ To put it simply, “the kings of earth exercise power one way, by lording it over their subjects, but Jesus’s followers are going to do it the other way, the way of the servant.”²

This central teaching of Jesus has been interpreted by Bible scholars and Christian writers to be anti-hierarchical. Donald Kraybill served for many years as a professor of sociology at Elizabethtown College. In his influential classic, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, he said:

There can be no misunderstanding here. Jesus turns our conventional definition of greatness upside-down. Pagans lord it over their subjects. They develop hierarchies of power. ‘Not so among you,’ whispers Jesus. In the upside-down kingdom greatness isn’t measured by how much power we exercise over others. Upside-down prestige isn’t calculated by the height of our rung on the social ladder. In God’s inverted kingdom, greatness is

signified by our willingness to serve. Service to others becomes the yardstick of stature in the new kingdom.³

Kraybill continued by saying that “instead of turning the old hierarchy upside-down and making a new one, Jesus questions the need for it. He declares hierarchy unconstitutional for his people.”⁴ In short, “Jesus flattens hierarchies.”⁵

Denny Gunderson has been a senior pastor and licensed mental health counselor as well as a trainer for international missions. Referring to Matthew 20: 25-28, he wrote: “What does this mean in plain English? I believe it means *not so with you!* Jesus clearly and unequivocally denounces as worldly any talk or practice that establishes hierarchical orders.”⁶

Back in the 1990s, Stacy Rinehart led a team that trained over 1800 missionaries who were sent to the former Soviet Union. He was a Vice President for The Navigators, and is founder and chairman of MentorLink. He has specialized in recruiting and building high-capacity teams. In his book, *Upside Down: The Paradox of Servant Leadership*, he wrote:

While each member of the family of Christ has his or her specific roles to play in accomplishing kingdom purposes, the relationships among its members are critically important. Those relationships do not emphasize rank. Instead, we stand shoulder to shoulder, mutually supporting and deferring to one another.”⁷

There seems to be no way around it: Jesus was against lording it over others, and Bible scholars and Christian writers explain that Jesus was against hierarchies. His teaching is obviously counter-cultural. After all, we live in a secular, commercial culture that is hierarchical. We take hierarchy for granted. Our culture encourages us to aspire to be at the top of the hierarchy so we *can* lord it over others. We want hierarchies so it will be easy to identify who is in charge, who is accountable, and therefore who will get the credit or blame.

We think that this is natural. This is the way things are. There is no other way. The idea of leading without a hierarchy sounds like chaos to us. How do you lead without a hierarchy? Can you really lead the way Jesus taught us to lead?

The answer is yes. Here are three suggestions to get you started. First, build a network of love. Second, establish a chain of coaching. Third, build and facilitate teams.

Network of love, chain of coaching

Organizations need leaders, but leaders do not have to sit at the top of a hierarchical pyramid. Leaders can guide a network of people whose members respond to changes in the external environment by changing the shape of the network. You can lead through your relationships instead of a pyramidal organization chart.

For a Christian, the network should be a network of love. Stacy Rinehart quoted Howard Snyder as saying: “The church is not a chain of command but a network of love. This is, of course, supremely impractical to people steeped in hierarchical concepts. But it is the way of the Kingdom.” Rinehart adds: “What a world of difference in the relationships and ministry of a group characterized by a network of love rather than a chain of command!”⁸

The network of love is based on mutual respect. Do we lord it over people when we respect them? No, we don’t. When we respect people, we listen to them, consult with them, include them, network with them, and team up with them.

In their book, *Lead Like Jesus*, Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges said that to lead like Jesus, you must love Jesus, and you must love *like* Jesus.⁹ How can we do that? Their answer is that we can “always to seek to do the loving thing in the use of our influence on the thinking, behavior, and development of others.”¹⁰

Instead of a chain of command, we can lead through a chain of coaching. Organizations need rules and procedures, but focusing on command and control does not bring out the best in others. We bring out the best in others by coaching, mentoring, inspiring, and engaging them.

Coaches help colleagues to identify and develop their God-given gifts. John Whitmore, in his book *Coaching for Performance*, said that “coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.”¹¹ The goal is to build the knowledge, experience, self-confidence, and performance of the individuals being coached.

Coaching is often achieved through effective questions, such as: (1) What is God calling you to do? (2) What is happening now? (3) What are some options? (4) What would be a good next step? Coaches don’t provide the answers; they help people to find their own answers.

Build and facilitate teams

One of the best ways to flatten the hierarchy is to build and facilitate teams. Teams allow individuals to make their highest and best contributions. Stacy Rinehart said:

If we are faithful stewards of our own gifts and spheres of ministry, we will probably be most comfortable serving God's people in a team context. Teams of leaders working together for the building up of God's people allow each leader to live most closely aligned to his or her gifting and sphere. Tasks and responsibilities are distributed around, with each person recognized for his or her unique contribution. The body is edified because all serve on a team. This is a model of ministry each believer can follow.¹²

Gene Wilkes agreed. In his book *Jesus on Leadership*, he said that "leadership of a team is the highest expression of servant leadership. This is true because team leadership embodies each of the principles of servant leadership. Servant leaders serve best when they team with others to accomplish the mission."¹³

There are a lot of advantages to working in teams. Teams can perform at higher levels than any individual member of the team. Teams provide more than one perspective, and can generate more than one way to solve a problem. Team members have more strengths than any one person is likely to have. Team members can keep each other accountable. Teams spread the risks and burdens of leadership. And "teams are how Jesus did ministry."¹⁴

A team is different from a work group. Work groups have a strong leader, individual accountability, and individual work products. The work group leader is responsible for the group's results. In short, a work group is hierarchical. By contrast, teams have shared leadership roles, individual and mutual accountability, and collective work products. Everybody on the team is responsible for the team's results. Teams are not hierarchical.

Work groups are often used for routine tasks such as collecting information and coordinating activities. Teams are best at solving problems and seizing opportunities. When you need a breakthrough, a new paradigm, or a creative solution, you need a team.

Team members are “equal” in that each member of the team is equally important to achieving the team’s task. Individuals are chosen for the team because of their background, experience, expertise, or insight, not because of their titles or positions in the organization. Teams are most effective when they consist of people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, expertise, and points of view who are willing to listen to each other. Teams do *not* function well when each person considers himself or herself a star—a sole performer who doesn’t need input or advice from others. Respect for other team members is a requirement for effective teamwork. The opinions and insights of all team members must be considered carefully.

Teams usually have a team leader who facilitates the team process, but the team leader is “first among equals.” Teams are not hierarchical in the way they operate, so that all ideas can be expressed and taken seriously. Team members can contribute ideas on any aspect of the task, even if it is outside their daily area of expertise or responsibility. No one individual has to be an expert in everything—it is the team as a whole that is the expert.

One of the unique aspects of a team is that leadership of the team may shift as the team’s work shifts to areas in which different team members have expertise. As Rinehart explained:

We work as a team, depending on one another’s strengths and roles. We recognize and deeply respect each other’s callings, strengths, spiritual gifts, and contributions. We have roles to play because of our gifts, and we each offer leadership to the group in those special areas. Our focus is to recognize what God wants to accomplish, to look to the best person to bring leadership to it, and then to support him or her in that process... This is what we term *rotating functional leadership*. Each person has a function, and when that function is needed, that person becomes our leader.”¹⁵

Leadership rotates as the tasks and issues change, allowing each member of the team to contribute his or her gifts or areas of strength.

Who’s in charge here?

Because hierarchies are so embedded in our secular, commercial culture, it is hard for some people to shift to networks, coaching, and teams. We are used to someone being in charge—someone at the top of a hierarchy. It is hard to imagine

any other way to get things done. But there is, in fact, another way, and it is a better way.

It helps to step back and acknowledge that we do not come together in organizations in order to create a hierarchy with a leader ensconced on top. We come together in organizations to get things done. That's why "who's in charge?" is not the most important question. There are more important questions, such as:

- Who are we here to serve? Why?
- How well are we serving them? How do we know?
- How can we serve them better? What resources would we need?

The practical questions that follow are:

- What specifically needs to be done? (Let's define our work.)
- Have all the tasks been assigned? (Let's allocate our work.)
- How can we measure our progress? (Let's monitor our work.)

Instead of focusing on a single leader who is "in charge," we should focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others. That's what servant-leaders do. And a team of servant-leaders can do this very well. In fact, a team is likely to do a better job than a single leader, because a single leader cannot know as much, or do as much, as a team.

In order to get the work done, team members need to consult with each other, coordinate with each other, and cooperate with each other. There must be consultation when gathering facts and opinions and developing ideas. There must be coordination when making decisions and planning activities. And there must be cooperation when implementing a decision or activity. Teams can do all those things, and produce excellent results without creating layers of hierarchical approval.

Of course, individual team members have specific responsibilities. They have tasks to complete and measurable goals to reach. They report to the full team, because they are accountable to the full team for achieving their individual results. This mutual accountability is one of the characteristics of an effective team.

Meanwhile, team leaders still have plenty of leadership responsibilities. Team leaders make sure their teams have what they need to be effective—time,

resources, training, information, and opportunities to learn and grow. Team leaders coach, advise, set the agenda, and monitor progress. They work *for* their teams, so their teams can perform at their highest possible levels. Team leaders also do real work as members of their teams. Team leaders do not just watch; they participate and report on their work, along with everyone else on the team.

A matter of faith

Does all this sound radical? Warm-and-fuzzy? A lot of wishful thinking? Something akin to anarchy? Donald Kraybill assures us:

Do not misunderstand. Jesus is not calling for social anarchy—for tossing out all the rules of social organization. His is not a recipe for disorder and confusion. Social roles and rules are needed and necessary for happy human living. Clear lines of communication and coordination are necessary in social organizations from families to large corporations. Different people have different gifts, different jobs, and different levels of authority and responsibility. Nevertheless, amid these webs of responsibility, kingdom people treat others and their contributions with dignity, equality, and respect—recognizing that in God’s eyes there are no small people. Everyone counts in a big way.¹⁶

My experience is that a team with a servant-leader as a facilitator works far better than employees working in a hierarchical structure, with its layers of bureaucracy and approvals. Because it is a more open and fluid process, the team process can be messy and confusing. However, because it promotes sharing and learning, the team process is likely to achieve a better result. For team members, the process is more meaningful, more motivating, and more fulfilling. It allows team members to contribute their God-given gifts at their highest levels, and to truly “own” the organization’s mission and work. A fully-functioning team experiences camaraderie and unity, but even more, team members can sense the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In the end, it is a matter of faith. As for me, I believe that this is the way we were designed to work together. Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ, told us that we should not lord it over each other, we should serve each other. Leading with a servant’s heart is the right thing both spiritually and practically. We should not be surprised. Jesus knows who we are. He knows how we were designed by the Creator. He knows how we need to lead and work together if we want to bring out the best in ourselves and others, and advance the kingdom of God.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read the passages in Scripture (Mark 10:42-45; Matthew 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-28). What do these passages mean to you?
2. Do you agree that these statements by Jesus are anti-hierarchical? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. How can you lead a network instead of a hierarchy?
4. The author says that if we respect people, we don't lord it over them—we listen to them, consult with them, include them, network with them, and team up with them. What do you think? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
5. What do you think it is like to lead through a chain of coaching instead of a chain of command?
6. Describe the best team you have ever served on, and why it was the best.
7. The author says that “who's in charge?” is not the most important question. What questions does he say are more important? Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?
8. What are the responsibilities of team leaders?
9. The author says that in his experience, a team with a servant-leader as a facilitator works far better than employees working in a hierarchical structure. What reasons does he give for his conclusion? Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?
10. Jesus said that we should not lord it over each other, we should serve each other. The author suggests that we can flatten hierarchies by leading through a network of love, a chain of coaching, and teams. What other ways can we lead that would flatten hierarchies and also be effective?

Notes

¹ N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 227-228.

² *Ibid.*, 139.

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- ³ Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 229.
- ⁴ Ibid., 230-231.
- ⁵ Ibid., 231.
- ⁶ Denny Gunderson, *The Leadership Paradox: A Challenge to Servant Leadership in a Power-Hungry World* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 2006), 29.
- ⁷ Stacy T. Rinehart, *Upside Down: The Paradox of Servant Leadership* (Colorado Spring, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 1998), 28.
- ⁸ Ibid., 50.
- ⁹ Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2005), 177-178.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 195.
- ¹¹ John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance: Growing Human Potential and Purpose*, 4th ed. (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009), 10.
- ¹² Rinehart, *Upside Down*, 124-125.
- ¹³ C. Gene Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1998), 27.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 212.
- ¹⁵ Rinehart, *Upside Down*, 92-93.
- ¹⁶ Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, 231.