

Study Guide and Outline

Richard Ackerman and Pat Maslin-Ostrowski,
The Wounded Leader: How Real Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis
 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002)

Preface

Leadership comes from inside, from who we are as persons who have been created in the image of God, including gifts, strengths, talents, and weaknesses and vulnerabilities. As a number of books on leadership have noted, good leaders are real people, who pay attention to their humanity (see the bibliography at the end of the accompanying study guide). Excellent leaders are often marked by an unexpected combination of “professional will and personal humility.” (Jim Collins, *From Good to Great*, p. 36).

From our premise that good leaders are reflective about their practice and their personal lives we created a three-year program called “Strengthening the Heartbeat,” opportunities for 17 principals to gather twice a year with 5 experienced Christian school educators who served as facilitators to examine our practice and our lives by reading, listening to speakers, and reflecting in small groups. With the assistance and support of the Kuyers Institute at Calvin College and a grant from the Van Lunen Foundation, we wanted to test a model for leaders everywhere to gather in a safe place to talk about both their calling and passion for leadership and also their wounds along the way.

The Wounded Leader is the book we read and discussed together during our January 9–11, 2008, conference. We present this discussion guide as a way to assist others who are on the pilgrimage.

Bruce Hekman, Ph.D.; Director, “Strengthening the Heartbeat.”

Introduction

Don Kok, superintendent of Lynden Christian Schools (Washington) observes that school leaders are often lightning rods for issues in a community. In order to survive the bolts that come, Don suggests, we need to be well grounded. In *The Wounded Leader*, the authors’ premise is that wounding is an inevitable dimension of leadership. They ask:

- How does a reasonable, well-intentioned person, who happens to be a school leader, preserve the healthy and real sense of self in the face of a host of factors challenging that self in the best scenario, and leading to a wounding crisis in the worst?
- What perspective toward the work of leadership might fortify the impact of these challenges, and produce a mind-set that leaves the person open to learn and grow from such experience?

Whether it’s the wounding of thousand cuts (as Henry VanderVeen, Principal of Langley Christian High School [British Columbia] observes) or a deep wound of having your core values and beliefs challenged in public, reflective leaders need to find a way face their fears, their wounds, and the wounds they give to others, and to gain strength and wisdom from these

experiences so that they can more effectively minister to the wounded in their school communities.

We suggest that you find a small group of leaders and a full day for this discussion. In the “Strengthening the Heartbeat” model we have small groups of five or six with two facilitators. We have provided several resources for your study of this topic. We encourage you to read the primary source, *The Wounded Leader: How Real Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis*, by Richard Ackerman and Pat Maslin-Ostrowski (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). We have provided the following resources to assist you: (all on the Kuyers Institute website)

- This discussion guide, including an outline of the book and short bibliography of additional resources.
- An audio file of Jim De Korne’s introduction to the conference.
- An audio file of two presentations by Dr. Mary Hulst, on the topic “Spiritual Disciplines for Leaders: The Practice of Piety.”

After you’ve read *The Wounded Leader* and listened to Jim De Korne’s audio introduction to the book, consider these discussion questions.

A Case History

Naive and Ambitious: A story of learning from conflict

I was right out of graduate school, full of knowledge about the latest trends in education and full of ambition. In the cutting-edge high school English program we were teaching “film study” and other trendy courses. One short film we used in this course was called “Phoebe,” which explores the conflicting emotions of a teenage girl who discovers she’s pregnant. That film became a lightning rod for a backlog of unaddressed concerns from some parents in the school.

The first indication I had that something was brewing was a letter sent to the principal by an unsigned group of “concerned parents” asking that he fire another teacher and me and that he himself resign. The school responded by inviting parents to view the film and by asking a small panel, including me, to speak to the issues raised after the film was shown. The auditorium was packed! After viewing the film and listening to the discussion, many parents decided it was much ado about nothing, but a very vocal minority vigorously questioned my qualifications for teaching a film about premarital sex to their children.

The board, which supported the principal and the teachers, was under tremendous pressure to respond, so they called a society meeting to vote on a confidence/no-confidence proposal. It was the biggest crowd that had ever turned out for a society meeting, which had to be held in the gym, the only room large enough to hold nearly 1600 people.

In the 4-month interval between the letter from concerned parents and the society meeting, I was struggling with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I was upset and angry that no parent had come to me directly to discuss this film and our study of it. On the other hand, I was genuinely grieving for the division in the school community, sometimes pitting children against their parents. My wise father, who lived in another state but was somewhat aware of the situation, sent me an article he had found about humility.

I was new to this community and naïve: I hadn't been sensitive to underlying issues. This community had no reason to entrust their children to me, because they didn't know me. I realized that even though my intentions were good and defensible, I had to take responsibility for the effects of my decisions. I was able to stand before the assembled multitude at the society meeting and apologize for what happened and to ask for forgiveness and patience and to invite those who had concerns to speak to me directly.

The society voted to support the board and the controversy subsided. I had learned a valuable lesson about myself (humility) and about the need to be more sensitive to the community served by the school. From the wound of being anonymously accused of bad judgment grew a new spiritual maturity and spirit of cooperation.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Psalm 55 together. What word associations come to mind when you think of wounding experiences in our lives? Can wounding ever be considered a potentially positive thing? (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7–10)
2. In Gen. 32:22–32 we read the account of Jacob's night of wrestling with God. What changes took place in Jacob's life after that encounter with God? Do the changes justify the statement "Never trust anyone without a limp"?
3. In *The Wounded Leader*, Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski argue that "wounding is an important aspect and source of leadership." (pp. xiv, 7) Read John 16:33 and then discuss whether leadership wounding is inevitable. What is a "wound"?
4. In *Leading with a Limp: Turning Your Struggles to Strengths*, Dan Allender lists what he calls "four realities for Christian leaders" (p. 37):
 - I am never sufficiently good, wise, or gifted to make things work.
 - My failures will harm others, the process and myself, no matter how hard I try to avoid failure.
 - I do greatest harm when I try to limit the damage of a crisis I have caused by not participating, quitting, or pushing for control.
 - Calling out for help from God and others is the deepest confession of humility.
 How much of our wounding is self-inflicted? (see 1 Pet. 4:12–16)
5. The authors of *The Wounded Leader* argue that "when leaders share a story of crisis, they potentially gain insight into their leadership practice, enhanced self-awareness, empathy for other, and affirmation of self." (p. 105) If you feel you are in a safe place, briefly share a wounding story and what you are learning from this experience.
6. Another key idea from the book is that "crisis is an emergent occasion for transformation." (p. xiv) Recall the story of Joseph in Genesis and read together Genesis 50:15–21. What possible transformation has taken place in Joseph's life? (See also John Ortberg's discussion of this story in Chapter 3 of *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*.)
7. In what ways can we wound teachers, parents, and students (see the "Cat Wounding" list at the end)?
8. Dr. Mary Hulst, in the two audio presentations on the practice of piety (see above), argues that the practice of personal piety has corporate as well as personal implications.

Listen to the recording and pause it at points to discuss what she says about the practice of piety in the life of leaders.

9. In order for crisis to be transformative, the authors of *The Wounded Leader* argue that the leader needs to have a certain mindset or attitude (see pp. 127–28). As a Christian leader, how would you respond to their suggestions? What might you add to their list?
10. Reflect on your reading, your experience, and your understanding of Bible passages to discuss the role and practice of humility in a leader’s life.
11. Conclude your discussion by inviting each participant to say what they will do differently as a result of this study and discussion. You might pair off and commit to calling each other as a practice of accountability. You might consider concluding with a circle prayer, where one person at a time sits or stands in the center while the others put their hands on that person and pray for them.

A Short Bibliography

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Wounded Healer*. New York: Image Doubleday, 1979.

Goleman, Daniel, et al. *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

Ortberg, John. *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.

Allender, Dan. *Leading with a Limp*. New York: Random House, 2006.

Cat Wounding

(From Warren Bennis, *Managing People is Like Herding Cats*)

This list grew out of a discussion of *The Wounded Leader* in January, 2008, at a three-day conference of Christian-school administrators who were participants in a 3-year leadership program called, “Strengthening the Heartbeat.” The discussion was led by Daniel Beerens, Vice President of Christian Schools International. The question was, How do we as administrators sometimes wound those we lead?

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being unclear or unrealistic in expectations • Withholding praise or appreciation • Being rude or critical, or giving public reprimands • Deceitfulness and game-playing • Ignoring or shunning • Perceived lack of support • Public shame • Lack of praise • Favoritism • Not leaving hope • Not providing encouragement/appreciation; low salaries, benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direction/support/resources • Failure to listen well or trust • Lack of support in difficult situations • Not having policies in place to protect • Failure to speak the truth in love • Public reprimand or lack of support when attacked • Sink or swim • Hiding behind board to squelch ideas • Meeting with parent and teacher; lack of safety; admin balance with parent or teacher |
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Book Outline

Preface

The book is driven by two questions (p. xi):

1. How does a reasonable, well-intentioned person who happens to be a school leader preserve a healthy and real sense of self in the face of a host of factors challenging that self in the best scenario and leading to a wounding crisis in the worst scenario?
2. What perspective toward the work of leadership might fortify the impact of these challenges and produce a mindset that leaves the person open to learn and grow from such experience?

Key idea: “Crisis is an emergent occasion for transformation.” (p. xiii)

Assumptions

- “Wounding is an important aspect and source of leadership.” (p. xiv)
- “Story and narrative are central to the kind of work leaders do.” (p. xiv)

Part I: Ironic Blessings

Chapter 1: To the Stars Through Adversity

Key idea: “The deepest obligation a leader has is to engage continually in a reflective process of making sense of his or her effect on others and on the school, and of understanding personal wounds” (p. 4).

Chronic Work-Life Tensions

Challenges to leadership include (from G. Donaldson)

- “a conspiracy of busyness” (p. 6)
- “Opinion setting and relationship building in schools is mostly inaccessible and even resistant to the principal’s formal attempt to guide and structure the direction of the school. . . . Structural conditions in schools work against the success of classical leadership.”(p. 6)

Reflect: Is this a function of a school’s size? Do Christian school leaders face “a conspiracy of busyness” that can limit their effectiveness as leaders?

The Story in the Stories

Unifying theme of the book: “Understanding the meaning of wounding through the prism of the educational leader’s experience offers a potentially remarkable path, not only to real leadership but to being a real person in one’s leadership.” (p. 7)

Three core understandings (p. 7):

1. Leadership roles often do not support, confirm, or resonate with the psychic needs of the person who becomes a leader.
2. Wounding is an inevitable part of leadership.
3. Woundedness is (at least) a double-edged sword.

Behind the Mask

Key idea: “leadership lives are, for the most part, determined by role expectations . . . a leader can be overly influenced and defined by the desires of significant others.” (pp. 8–9)

Inevitability of Wounding

Key idea: “Understanding that wounds are part of the cycle of leadership may make it a little easier for a leader to respond with grace and accept the inevitability of wounding.” (p. 12)

A Double-Edged Sword

“A wound is a potential catalyst for a leader to grow, or it can enmesh a person in crisis” (p. 12)

The Sacred Call

“The wound . . . can serve as a call to examine the foundation of one’s leadership.” (p. 13)

Reflect: Chapter 1 in *The Wounded Leader* describes “chronic work-life tensions” that contribute to leadership wounds (pp. 6–7). The authors also suggest that those who are servant-leaders may be more vulnerable to wounding (pp. 130–31). Are these conditions inevitable or can they be changed?

Chapter 2: Anatomy of a Wound: Where Does It Hurt?

Defining “woundedness” eludes precise theoretical comprehension, but “it hurts when some essential part of oneself is misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned.” (p. 17) What is endangered is a person’s integrity, identity, fallibility, and spirit.

Call to Consciousness: The Mythological

The story of the Fisher King: one interpretation is to say he lost his “feeling function.” “The king’s wound, then, understood as the loss of feeling function, suggests that his generative capacity to value, give pleasure, and bestow a sense of meaning to life is missing.” (p. 19)

Key idea: The first step to healing depends entirely on knowing that one is wounded.” (p. 22)

Call to Consciousness: The Medical

The example of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a story of “illness as teacher” (p. 23).

“Ill people need to tell their stories to reformulate their perception and relationship to the world.” (p. 25)

Call to Consciousness: The Personal

“There are elemental themes of *vulnerability, isolation, fear, and power* manifested in the wounding experience.” (p. 26).

“The more you care and the more helpful you are, the longer stretches the line of problems to solve and people to help . . . easily threatening the barriers (boundaries) between public and private, career and family, and professional and personal that many need for a sense of balance and meaning in their lives.” (p. 29)

“Leadership fear takes various guises: fear of appearing weak, fear of failure, fear of change and of not changing, and fear of being judged and criticized.” (p. 30) But “if fear is managed well, it can be positive; it has the potential to spur people on to do what is needed, what is right.” “We expect our leaders to be fearless, and most leaders also believe that they ought not to be afraid.” (p. 31)

“Most school leaders are surprised at how little power they have. . . . The school leader is traditionally given tremendous responsibility, but not a lot of authority.” (p. 32)

Ironic blessing: “The deepest obligation a leader has is to engage continuously in a reflective process of making sense of his/her leadership, and trusting his/her influence on others and on the school.” (p. 33)

Reflect: Is it true that “most school leaders . . . have little actual power, but lots of responsibility”? What are your leadership fears, and how do you face them? (see Joshua, ch. 1)

Part II: Wounded Leaders

This is a catalog of stories, or case studies of wounded leaders.

- **Chapter 3**, “Great Expectations”: the story of Mike, a new superintendent caught between a court order to desegregate schools and the wishes of board members to ignore the judge.
- **Chapter 4**, “Fragile Power”: Sandra is conflicted by her inability to prevent a student from entering a life of crime and her lack of power to eradicate student violence.
- **Chapter 5**, “Branded”: Alice, a dedicated principal, tries heroically to raise test scores, but results do not come quickly enough and she is shunned and stigmatized by colleagues.
- **Chapter 6**, “When the Bubble Bursts”: Sharon is elated about the opportunity to launch a brand new school, only to be made the scapegoat by a disgruntled, antagonistic, and divided faculty.
- **Chapter 7**, “Trapped in a Cocoon”: Carlos is a new principal facing the dilemma of either remaining true to his personal beliefs about leadership or changing to gain the trust of teachers.
- **Chapter 8**, “The Trial”: Nancy, who believes she is supposed to be selfless, self-sufficient, and tough discovers that these very qualities prevent her from listening to her own needs.
- **Chapter 9**, “Dancing on the Skillet”: Christopher, a superintendent at the apex of his career, clashes with new board members who have a different take on leadership style and values.

Reflect: Which of these stories resonates most with you? How would you have responded in a similar situation?

Part III: Looking for the Good Story

Chapter 10: Narrative Healing, *Once Upon a Time*

Key Idea: The story form is a dominant sense-making tool for school administrators, and a leader's narrative identity (how the leader chooses to frame the story) gives insight into how the leader interprets his or her experience (p. 96). (This section draws on the work of A. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995].)

Restitution, Chaos, Quest: Three Narrative Structures

Restitution: The story of Joan. The assumption of the restitution story is that all problems can be fixed (p. 100). (This is a “culturally preferred story” (p.110) that may deter the leader from returning to the source of the problem.)

Chaos: Harry's story has an absence of narrative order because it is told as an event without sequence or discernible causality—the future is uncertain.

Quest: “Quest stories meet suffering head on: they accept illness and seek to use it.” (p. 103) Christopher (from ch. 9) does not want to—or perhaps cannot—return to who he was before the crisis; he is on a path to change.

A Simple Form of Healing

Key Idea: “When leaders share a story of crisis, they potentially gain insight into their leadership practice, enhanced self-awareness, empathy for other, and affirmation of self. If the storytelling and listening conditions are right, the experience can be powerful: there is promise of learning, growth, and healing.” (p. 105)

Reflect: Do you agree that storytelling can be a “sense-making” tool? Which of three narrative structures described here best fits your own story?

Chapter 11: What Wounding Teaches

- Learn to trust the unattended areas of your leadership, especially your feelings.
- Listen honestly and deeply for the questions that are feared or left out of your work life altogether.
- Find people to talk to whom you can really trust.

Don't Do Something: Just Be There: The Outward Bound Philosophy

Key ideas: “The wound is not the mountain; it is simply how you decide to respond to the situation. The real learning, most Outward Bound instructors would say, comes in being able to relax in that moment and just be there.” (p. 110)

“There is simply the state of being right in between the action we think we need to run from the situation, and the comfort of staying in the place that is familiar, . . . what Parker Palmer called ‘the tension of opposites. It is just being there and being able to see what is happening . . . also described by Robert Johnson as highly conscious waiting.’” (p. 110)

Indoor Education: The Emotional Life of the Leader

Key ideas: Conflict and dilemma are a constant and natural part of leadership life, as are leadership wounds, and they may even be useful. “Disequilibrium rather than stability stimulates the system to respond in the most dynamic, fundamental, and noticeable ways. The leadership task is to use information to stimulate disequilibrium, which provides energy for change.” (p. 111) See also Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*.

Howard Gardner: “The less a person understands his own feelings, the more he will fall prey to them. . . . The less a person understands the feelings, the responses, and the behavior of others, the more likely he will interact inappropriately with them and therefore fail to secure his proper place within the larger community.” (p. 112)

Emotional truth is found in “gauging accurately how our behaviors are received and perceived by others, and concomitantly, discussing and mediating with others feelings of fear, uncertainty, and even hostility that our behaviors might provoke.” (p. 112) In a sense, emotional intelligence required understanding unstructured information gained through interaction with others and avoiding... ‘self-sealing theories of action.’” (p. 113)

Damasio’s brain research: “Well-targeted and well-deployed emotion seems to be a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly.” (p. 114) See also Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind*.

Why Can’t We Just Talk About This?

Key idea: Schools tend to be organized with a stunning focus on function, which makes for a pervasive and subtle form of alienation (p. 116).

Case Story: “A blend of case teaching and storytelling...calls for a kind of critical thinking and feeling in an open and safe environment, one in which participants are, in effect, working out issues that they may not understand or may not have thought about or ever talked about.” (p. 117).

Critical friends groups and tuning protocols are two attempts to create conversations in schools (from the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform) (p. 118).

The Sacred Question: Why Are You Wounded?

Key example: Parker Palmer’s “Clearness Committee”: “The process requires a number of critical elements that involve willingness to communicate clearly and honestly; change one’s mind-set; submit dearly-held beliefs, feelings, and pre-conceptions to the questions of the group; use silence constructively; and trust the process.” (p. 119)

The Screw-Up Hall of Fame: The story of Paul Bianchi’s practice of breaking the taboo about acknowledging and learning from failure. It “acknowledges that our work is as complicated as life itself and that the potential for great folly and great achievement fills our days.” (pp. 121–22)

Create Circles of Friends

As a way of dealing with leadership isolation, the authors recommend that leaders learn to create “circles of friends, . . . the safe company of people who are willing to witness each other’s stories, without necessarily trying to do or fix anything.” (p. 122)

The example of the International Network of Principals’ Centers based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where “the fundamental purpose that the Network holds sacred is the belief that for schools to improve, school leaders must be actively involved in their own and each other’s professional development, believing that learning for adults and children in schools can be personal, attractive, and compelling.” (p. 123)

Key Idea: “The need to pay attention to the emotional side of leadership, the need for sustained personal and real conversation among school leaders, and the need for genuine connection and affiliation must be accommodated if leaders are to grow and flourish.” (p. 124)

What to do if you meet a wounded leader crossing the road (pp. 124–25):

1. Don’t ask, “Why did you cross the road?”
2. Ask, “What is happening now?”
3. Stay in touch with your own fear that you may one day be in the same situation.
4. Ask, “How do you feel about it?”
5. Don’t push the person in a direction you might choose yourself.
6. Ask, “What do you want to do about it?”
7. Use your own wounds to develop understanding and compassion.
8. Laugh at fearful things together.
9. Just listen.

Reflect: Of the models for creating a safe relationship with other administrators, which one seems to fit your situation best? Is there other advice you would add to the list “What to do if you meet a wounded leader crossing the road”?

Chapter 12: Seeking a Cure for Leadership

Key Idea: “A good school must learn to bend itself around the strengths and vulnerabilities of its leader.” (p. 127)

Qualities of a leadership mindset, drawn from the authors’ study of wounded leaders (pp. 127–28):

- I am genuinely interested in learning things, which helps others in their attempts to learn.
- I move, sometimes awkwardly, toward understanding the leadership position I am in and the responsibilities with which I have been entrusted by others.
- I may make mistakes, and I may be inconsistent at times.
- I can talk about my leadership with others.
- I have complicated and sometimes contradictory feelings about power and sharing it.
- I value and respect the dignity of others, yet when I’m fearful I sometimes forget it.
- I try to remain aware of what I need and what others need from my leadership at any particular time.

- I can focus more on challenges at hand rather than expending my energy proving I am something I am not.
- I can use more of my knowledge, skills, and creative imagination in framing and solving problems than in defending myself.
- I can freely change and grow in a leadership position because I am not bound by rigid concepts of what I have been, am now, or ought to be.
- By my own openness and honesty with myself, I can bring out these same qualities in others.

Recurring theme in this book: “An important learnable moment for the leader occurs during a wounding crisis, during times of discord.” (p. 130) “A school leader, as well as everyone else in a school, has the capacity for developing genuine emotional intelligence and using it effectively.” (p. 131)

A caution for “servant leaders”: “Many school leaders inevitably become ‘other centered’, carrying the weight of other people’s worries, frustrations, problems, and desires; they then develop their own wounds precisely because they often believe they must hide their fear and vulnerability from others (and quite often from themselves).” (p. 130)

Reflect: Do you find the list of qualities of a leadership mindset helpful? Would you add anything to this list based on your worldview and experience?