

Leading *From the* Second Chair

*Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your
Role, and Realizing Your Dreams*

By Warren Schuh

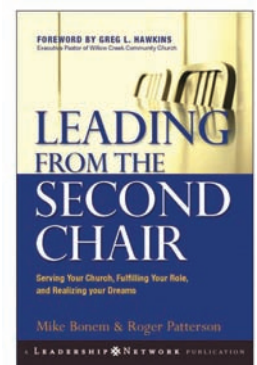


Many capable, idealistic, servant-minded people find themselves in “second chair” management and leadership roles within Christian organizations and churches across the country. For many, this is a positive, fulfilling experience while for others it is frustrating and sometimes even painful.

Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson, co-authors of *Leading from the Second Chair: Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your Role, and Realizing Your Dreams* (Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series), have done Christian leaders everywhere a real service by identifying the factors that can make the difference between frustration and fulfillment for “second chair” managers and leaders.

At the same time, they have provided significant insight for all who occupy the “first chair” and those who report to “second chair” leaders. Teams will be stronger and more effective if they understand the principles identified in this book.

So what is a “second chair” leader anyway? This book defines



the role this way:

“A second chair leader is a person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization.”

This is a person who reports to someone else occupying the first chair and is therefore in a subordinate role. But it's a role that, in the context of team, significantly influences the overall

and chair leaders must understand and learn to balance.

Paradox I Subordinate-Leader

“The subordinate-leader paradox is challenging to successfully balance because it is relationally intensive and partially dependent on another person: your first chair. It deals with how you

lead while others are much more controlling. At the end of the day, the second chair can do little to change the first chair. A second chair leader's most valuable tool for promoting change is his or her own attitudes and actions.

“This does not mean that the second chair is to be a mindless robot, obeying whatever commands the first chair issues. Second chairs are leaders. Our

Four Choices of the Second Chair

The Old Testament personality, Joseph, became a model of second chair leadership. In the face of extremely negative circumstances, Joseph made choices that maximized his God-given talents and abilities. He served with excellence in every context.

If you want to be a person whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization, consider these four specific choices:

Choice One: Put on Leadership

Lenses. No matter what the challenge, step back and look at every problem or opportunity through leadership lenses. This is the perspective you have as you look at a given situation and try to see an issue as your first chair would see it, keeping the overall needs of the organization in mind.

Choice Two: Maximize Major Opportunities. Much of a second chair's time is spent on routine activities: things that have to be done, week in and week out. Less frequently, unique opportunities will arise that will stretch the second chair leader and can have tremendous benefit for the organization. You may be able to see these opportunities coming, or they might sneak up without warning. Be prepared to recognize and act on those unique moments that can shape you and set you apart as a second chair leader.

Choice Three: Don't Back Down from the Right Decision. Sometimes a major leadership opportunity comes our way and we are tempted to run. The choice that a second chair must make is to pray first for God's wisdom, and then to make the right decision, even if it is not easy.

Choice Four: Decide to Thrive. Some people thrive in the second chair. Others only survive. The difference is attitude. Essential attitudes for thriving second chair leaders are submission, service, thankfulness and passion. You can have the first three attitudes and be a good second chair leader, but the attitude of passion distinguishes you as one of the best.

(See chapter 2, pages 19-24.)



This does not mean that the second chair is to be a mindless robot, obeying whatever commands the first chair issues.

Second chairs are leaders. Our definition makes it clear they are not content to sit back and wait for someone else to take action.

definition makes it clear they are not content to sit back and wait for someone else to take action. This is the tension of the paradox. It is not easy to be a subordinate and a leader. We recognize that some circumstances may not allow a second chair to lead at all. But in most circumstances, you can discover the genius of the *and* as a subordinate *and* a leader.” (See page 25.)

Paradox II Deep-Wide

“Second chair leaders live in the deep-wide paradox every day. They

organization. The resulting value added by the second chair makes the organization much better than it otherwise would be.

Through multiple interviews with second chair leaders around the country, Bonem and Patterson identified three significant paradoxes that all sec-

as a leader are interfacing with and following the lead of your senior leader. Some first chairs are a pleasure to work with, and some are not. Some are concerned about the personal lives and careers of their subordinates, and others seem detached or self-absorbed. Some give their second chairs ample room to

have no choice. Their role requires them to see the big picture and make decisions that affect the entire organization. It frequently requires them to delve into the details to solve a problem in some part of the organization, or to launch a new ministry. They move from

tent at the same time. Some people escape from this tension by running to one end of the paradox or the other. One person might be pushed beyond contentment to complacency, thinking that dreams are only for dreamers or first chair leaders who can control their

learning to live joyfully in these tensions on a day to day basis is the key to fulfillment in a second chair role. And the first chair leader who learns to appreciate the tensions her second chair leader deals with will become the better leader for it.



“Effective second chair leaders understand and live with the tension of contentment-dreaming. They know they must avoid these traps. Rather than crumpling in the tension, they let it drive them toward God, toward a determination to capture the impossible dreams that He has given them for their own lives and their ministry.”

strategic planning meeting to analysis of why one department is over budget, from a discussion about the church’s spiritual maturity to recruiting additional small-group leaders. If a first chair is not well versed in details, it is excused because he or she is the ‘visionary leader,’ a big-picture person. But if a second chair misses either end of the deep-wide continuum, the person’s performance might be considered ‘in need of improvement.’” (See page 67.)

Paradox III Contentment-Dreaming

“The third paradox, contentment-dreaming, reaches deep inside each of us. It stirs up a restless tension in our souls. It makes us wonder if it is possible to dream great dreams and be con-

future. Another person is wound tighter than a spring, intent on seeing her dreams realized *now!* Yet another tries to mentally escape from his current reality, spending all of his time dreaming about the future rather than dealing in the present. Effective second chair leaders understand and live with the tension of contentment-dreaming. They know they must avoid these traps. Rather than crumpling in the tension, they let it drive them toward God, toward a determination to capture the impossible dreams that He has given them for their own lives and their ministry.” (See page 117.)

Just knowing that these paradoxes exist and are common to all second chair leaders is extremely helpful. But

Bonem and Patterson are not Pollyannaish about second chair leadership tenure. It is clear that not all first chair/second chair relationships are ideal fits. The two must complement each other in order for a strong team to develop. When there is a change in first chair leadership there is often a need to evaluate the effectiveness of the match between the first and second chair leaders. This book provides helpful and wise counsel to second chair leaders who find themselves in the place of evaluating whether or not they are the right complement to the new first chair leader.

While second chair roles have existed in churches and Christian organizations for a long time, specific help and guidance for those in this role has been scarce. Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson have provided significant insight in this new Jossey-Bass release.

Warren Schuh is the executive pastor of Calvary Community Church, West-lake Village, Calif. Contact him at warrens@calvarycc.org or visit calvarycc.org.



Warren Schuh
Leading From the Second Chair, Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson, Copyright © 2005 by Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson; quotes reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

© 2006, Christian Management Association. All rights reserved.