

# Leading Quietly: Widening the Circle of Influence

Dr Brian Harris

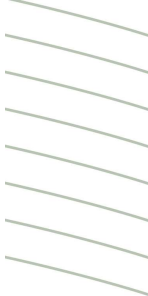
This paper explores the theory of quiet leadership and its relevance for those who assume they are not leaders or who lead reluctantly. It discusses some of the key virtues of quiet leadership – modesty, restraint, tenacity, interdependence and other-centeredness – and links these to theological images of leaders as servants, shepherds, stewards, sages and seers, all the time exploring how ordinary people can widen their circle of influence and their capacity to lead lives which are a force for good.

I think that most of us want to make a difference in life, but we doubt that we can. We don't usually think of ourselves as leaders – that lofty status belongs to others, who are larger than life and really not like us at all. And yet we all know that in our own way we can make a difference. This has been expressed in different ways. “*It is better to light a candle than to curse the dark*” is one of my favourites.

Or perhaps you have seen the Starfish clip on YouTube where a young boy is throwing starfish washed up by the tide and in danger of being killed from the rising sun, back into the ocean.<sup>1</sup> A man watching the boy challenges him. “Why are you doing that? Don't you see how many starfish there are? You can't possibly throw them all back in. What difference can you make?” But the boy simply bends down, picks up another starfish, throws it in the ocean and says – “there, I made a difference to that one.”

Those of you who might have worked in some of the poorest countries of the world where need simply overwhelms you, know the wisdom of that. **Not being able to do everything should never be an excuse for doing nothing.**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-aVMdJ3Aok>



It's the reason I wrote my book, *The Tortoise Usually Wins*, because I wanted to affirm that ordinary people can genuinely make a difference, and can change the world, one step at a time. And I thought it would be helpful to talk about some of these insights at this ANZTLA conference because librarians are often falsely caricatured as people who you overlook – people who work quietly in the background tracking down obscure texts and volumes, people you wouldn't quickly link the L word to – leadership. But I don't for one moment believe that caricature to be true. To the contrary, I believe that anyone who really wants to make a difference, and who carefully and systematically thinks about how they will do so, can. Here is what I wrote in the opening chapter of *The Tortoise Usually Wins*:


*I've written this book for those who consider themselves as unlikely leaders. If you are one of them, you probably don't consider yourself to be the most talented, charismatic or gifted individual. You might have landed up in a leadership position, but are perhaps surprised that you got there. Alternatively, you might be well aware that you gained the post because you were the only available candidate. Or it could be that you hold no leadership position, but you'd like to, not because you relish the limelight, but because you believe in what your group is trying to do and you'd really like to help them to do it a little better. It could even be that the thought of leadership makes you want to run a mile, but you feel disgruntled with the way things are and wish that there were better leaders around to deal with the challenge. It could be that your name is written against that challenge, even though that option hasn't yet dawned on you and the thought of it fills you with an uneasy sense of panic.*

*All these scenarios are ones which call for quiet leadership.*

*Quiet Leadership is a theory of leadership that sidesteps questions of charisma, and when looking at the characteristics of a leader focuses on leadership virtues and values, rather than innate abilities. It explores ways to have influence regardless of formal position, and it examines the relationship between desired outcomes and virtues such as restraint, modesty and tenacity.*

*It debunks the myth that the good is the enemy of the best and suggests that the reverse is true. Too often competent people are paralyzed into inactivity by unattainable images of perfection. Rather than make their helpful contribution, they retreat so as not to be in the way of a great leader. The trouble is that very few great leaders exist. While it's wonderful when they do, the leadership void in most organizations points to their rarity. Quiet leaders realize this. They are modest enough to know they are not great, but they are tenacious and committed to the task and willing to work co-operatively with others to achieve it. When released to make their good contribution, very pleasing things happen. What's more they happen in real life – not in the fantasy land of non-existent heroes (3-4).<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Brian Harris, *The Tortoise Usually Wins: Biblical Reflections on Quiet Leadership for Reluctant Leaders* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013).



Can we be leaders and can we influence others? Our conference theme certainly suggests that we can, for it builds on the blocks of transformation, innovation and collaboration – and if that truly happens, current reality will morph into an alternate reality – a transformed, innovative, collaborative reality, and transformed realities only happen as a result of leadership. Let’s recap some leadership 101 principles.

Those who study leadership theory will tell you that key theories of leadership usually fall into one of four categories – heroic or charismatic leadership, positional leadership, leadership through influence, or leadership assessed in the light of outcomes.

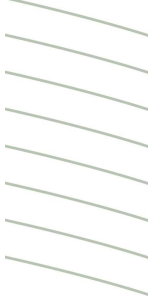
A quick comment on each.

The heroic or charismatic view of leadership tends to be the default drive. Those who embrace it point to qualities inherent within leaders, which make it more likely that they will gain a following. Some are natural genetic advantages that people have. For example, taller people are more likely to be seen as leaders. Whilst we can try and boost our height with heels, over the longer term, there is not much we can do about that. If we are shorter than average, we are less likely to be seen as charismatic leaders. Note that I said less likely. Disadvantages can be overcome, and sometimes, with good humour or creativity, we can work disadvantages to our advantage. For all that, less likely means less likely.

Others we can remedy more readily. For example, charismatic leaders are usually optimistic and affirming. They speak about their hopes more readily than their fears, and in so doing, inspire others. Now we might not naturally be optimistic people – indeed, we might be people who find that anxiety and fear more naturally grip our hearts, but we can intentionally think about what we speak about, and instead of deferring to our Eeyore-like instincts to immediately focus on the sad and depressing, we can speak to our hopes and dreams. Once we have been alerted to the issue, it is a matter of choice - albeit that we might need to remind ourselves to tilt towards the positive instead of the negative, and we might need to remind ourselves over and over again. Those who are natural charismatic leaders rarely need such reminders. For them it is more of an instinct, but some instincts can be reproduced, and we can learn from them.

Positional view of leadership focus, not too surprisingly, on position. If you want to know who the leader is, look for the one who holds the CEO title – the Boss. However, increasingly leadership theorists note that whenever significant change takes place it is almost always as a result of leaderships (plural) rather than leadership (singular). And there are many positions of influence within most organisations. Whether position is used as a doorway to leadership or not, largely depends on whether the holder of the position is alert to the possibilities inherent within the position they hold.

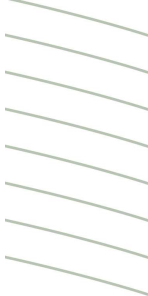
Most of you work in theological libraries. Think of the position you hold. You are the gateway to the conversation that has taken place about the Christian faith for the last 2000 years. Our students and staff look to you to point them to aspects of that conversation that they wish to explore. Some of them are charismatic leaders who will talk about their findings far and wide. What they say will often be shaped by what you point them towards.



You might like to think about causes you wish to champion to make sure they get an adequate airing. I see our own librarians at Vose Seminary do that wonderfully well. Amongst our many, many racks of books, they have opened up spaces where a cluster of books orientate facewards instead of spine wards, towards anyone walking down the line. What difference does that make? A huge difference. I know it for myself. Like any academic I'm aware that there are certain books in my field that I must read, and I will track them down no matter how obscure the location. But I also select books spontaneously to enrich me. And I have noticed that more than 70% of my spontaneous choices comes, not too surprisingly, from those books which orientate facewards towards me. Space only allows that to be a relatively small number – so who selects which books face outwards... well, you do. And in doing that, you are shaping which books are more likely to be read. And in shaping which books are more likely to be read, in your own way, you are shaping which ideas are more likely to find traction, to be disseminated and to make a difference. Now do that intentionally over a 40 year career, and you actually do make a difference. It is one little example of positional leadership.

The third common view of leadership suggests that leadership is about influence. Though for the last decade plus I have been the principal of Vose Seminary, before that I was a pastor of a few Baptist churches. Baptist churches work with a congregational system of government – in other words, it is the congregation who ultimately make all the decisions for the church, not the pastors. Now the pastor or pastors can certainly use their influence to try and shape the decisions that get made, but so can anyone else in the congregation. Ask any Baptist pastor about the influence exercised by some congregational members and they will have a story to tell you... sometimes one that inspires, but often not. The pastor might stand up at a members meeting and propose a bold new plan, but as he or she does so, a member of the congregation might somewhat too obviously fold their arms and snort softly. That might be all they do, but as every eye in the meeting glances towards that person, the die is cast and you know the plan is doomed. Though they utter not one word of protest at the meeting, after that non-verbal cue (if they are a person of significant influence), you know the plan will be voted down. That's leadership through influence – in this case, not very constructive leadership, indeed, this is an example of influence being used as a brake rather than a door opener, but it is leadership in the sense that leadership is about impacting outcomes – in this case, influence leads to a 'no' outcome.

But that's a negative example. Let me use a more positive one which I hope will be closer to home. After I published *The Tortoise Usually Wins*, my home church decided to encourage church members to read it – which was really nice of them. Unfortunately the day it was announced, the announcer was at best ho hum. It came garbled out as, "Brian's just published a new book you can purchase, the craft group meets on Wednesday, and please remember to pick up your children from children's church at the end of the service." The notice was totally lost in the wad of the usual trivia. Not too surprisingly, no one paid any attention to it and the large pile of my books was no smaller even when we were deep into our after church tea time, and the window of opportunity for sales was fast fading. At that critical point Bec Oates came to me and said, "Brian, your books aren't selling. Why?" "I don't think anyone heard the notice," I grumbled in reply. "That's not good enough," she said. "I'll get them moving." And bless her, she did. She went up to one group of people after another and asked, "Have you purchased Brian's book yet? It's really good.



And so cheap. Better get in quickly before they all sell.” Within minutes, every book was sold. All she did was to use the influence she had through knowing most of the people there to get the books sold. I’d like to think she made a contribution for good by doing that!

The fourth view of leadership focuses firmly on outcomes. This view suggests that it really doesn’t matter if you do or don’t have charisma, a position from which to exercise leadership, or even much influence. At the end of the day, when leaders are around, things happen, and you get different outcomes. If they are good leaders, the outcomes are good. If they are toxic leaders, like Hitler, the outcomes are terrible, but regardless, when leaders are around, you get different outcomes. Some theorists consider this view as an extension of the leadership by influence view, because they say you can be a person of influence, but unless you carefully think about the outcomes you want, you might not use the influence you have to get the outcomes you desire. And indeed, all too often we see examples of people using their influence to stop things from happening, rather than to lead a group towards a more desirable future.

So there you have it – four key views on leadership... charisma, position, influence and outcomes. Tonight I want to champion one simple idea. Even if you are not naturally a charismatic leader, you can be a very effective leader in the sense that your involvement leads to a better outcome than would otherwise have been achieved, and you do that by taking seriously the possibility that you can make a difference if you work steadily, persistently and resiliently towards the good that you have identified Joseph Badaracco<sup>3</sup> who, together with David Rock,<sup>4</sup> is usually credited as the pioneer in the work on quiet leadership, has written:

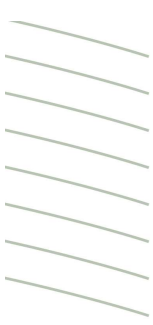
*Over the course of a career spent studying management and leadership, I have observed that the most effective leaders are rarely public heroes. These men and women are rarely high-profile champions... They move patiently, carefully, and incrementally... I have come to call these people quiet leaders because their modesty and restraint are in large measure responsible for their impressive achievements. And since big problems can only be resolved by a long series of small efforts, quiet leadership, despite its seemingly slow pace, often turns out to be the quickest way to make an organization – and the world – a better place.*

If it is true that it only takes patient persistence to make a difference, how come most of us are not far more effective leaders? There is, as always, a catch. Dan Allender has written about some of the challenges of leadership in his excellent book *Leading with a Limp*.<sup>5</sup> In it he notes that all leaders eventually have to face five categories of problems. He classifies these as being:

1. Crisis
2. Complexity
3. Betrayal
4. Loneliness
5. Weariness

<sup>3</sup> Joseph L. Badaracco Jr., *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> David Rock, *Quiet Leadership: Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).



I have explored these five leadership challenges with many groups over the years, and usually ask which challenge group members find the most difficult in their own leadership. The most common answer is betrayal – that awful realisation in leadership that someone you thought supported you fully, someone who had your back, is actually singing a different tune behind it. That is hard to deal with. But here is the liberating thing. The fact that betrayal finds its way onto a list of the five most common leadership challenges underlines its inevitability. When it happens to us, it means we can breathe deeply and say “though this feels very personal, it was always going to happen sometime.” Just being able to say that helps to normalise the experience, and normalising it helps to take some (though not all) of the sting out of it.

However, rather than dwell on betrayal, I thought tonight I’d rather say a little about the leadership challenge of complexity... and I do that very mindful of the complex setting in which you practice your profession. Constant change is the new normal, and if you’ve been around for a few years, the job you initially signed up for is probably not the job you are doing right now.

In complex situations I draw great encouragement for the ethically perplexing situation the Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, found themselves in thousands of years ago. You find the account in Exodus 1. Let me recap it briefly.

After Joseph had helped to rescue both the Egyptians and Hebrews during his time as Prime Minister of Egypt, a new Pharaoh came to power who knew nothing about Joseph. And indeed, we should always worry when we have leaders who have no historical perspective. Declaring the Hebrews to be enemies, this Pharaoh puts them into slavery, but even that is not enough to allay his fears. He decides that in future, all male Hebrew babies must be killed at birth. He accordingly instructs two Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, to act as his executioners, and to kill all Hebrew male babies at birth. Aghast at this instruction, and no doubt terrified at the likely repercussion for disobedience, these two women know only one thing. This is a command they cannot obey. And they don’t.

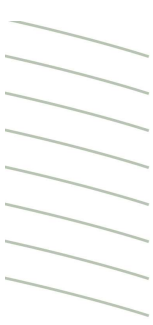
Inevitably Pharaoh calls them to account. It is here that they tell their creative porky. “Hebrew women,” they declare, “are not like refined Egyptian women, who need the services of a midwife. Hebrew women are like old cows. Their babies simply drop out. So what’s a midwife to do? We are never called in on time to kill off the males.”

It’s an obvious untruth, but prejudice makes fools of all who fall for its allure, and Pharaoh is duped. You can almost hear him saying, “I knew it. Those Hebrews just aren’t like normal people.”

God is clearly pleased with the midwives’ response, because Exodus 1 tells us God rewards them with children of their own. What is more, what are their names? Shiprah and Puah. That’s significant, because in the ancient world having your name remembered (along with having children of your own) was seen as the greatest of all blessings. By contrast, Pharaoh’s name was – pass. The passage deliberately omits it. He forever remains “Pharaoh who?”

<sup>5</sup> Dan B. Allender, *Leading with a Limp: Turning Your Struggles into Strengths* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2006).





Now lest you feel, what's the big deal about this, let me clarify the ethical issues in this scenario.

The midwives lie – and God rewards them. Does that mean lying is OK? “Hold on,” you say, “they lie to save lives. They realise not all ethical obligations are of the same magnitude. Saving lives trumps truth telling – it's not such a big deal.” Really – what was the lie they told? “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women” is the direct quote from the passage. That's a very dangerous lie. It “others” all Hebrew women, indeed all the Hebrew people. It's the stuff that makes the mass extermination of groups possible. Actually, it's the kind of attitude that made the Holocaust possible. Say that people aren't really like other people and any atrocity becomes acceptable. This was a very dangerous lie.

What's more, it's an unsuccessful lie. On hearing it, Pharaoh simply shrugs and says, “so death at birth isn't possible. We'll drown them instead.” And that's exactly what happens.

So Shiphrah and Puah are not just liars, but dangerous, unsuccessful liars. But God ensures that their names are remembered and they are given children of their own. In the impossible situation in which they found themselves, they did not find a tidy way forward. But God fully understood their dilemma, and rewards them.

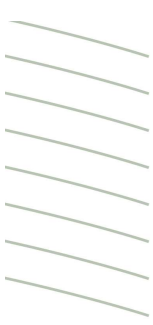
I'm sure you see the difference this makes. Leadership invariably leads to situations of real complexity – situations where you sometimes have to decide between bad and worse, or when the right path forward is alarmingly filled with compromise. And this passage quietly affirms that God understands, and simply requires us to act in accord with our most deeply held convictions, and then to leave the outcome to the God who knows every aspect of every situation.

And let's be realistic. The context in which we have to exercise our own quiet form of leadership is not easy. The Christian faith is being challenged more vigorously than ever before. While the new atheists express their criticism of Christianity in different ways, in essence they are saying that it is intellectually vacuous, morally suspect and experientially empty. It's a harsh trio of charges.

In their own way, our theological libraries are more important than ever. They provide resources to equip us for this context – be they intellectual resources, or resources that challenge us to more godly living, or which spur us to greater creativity in the church communities we help to form and shape.

As ever, as we try to provide leadership in this setting, we need to hold to the five S words that describe the essence of Christian leadership in any setting. Leaders are to be

- S – Servants
- S – Shepherds
- S – Stewards
- S – Sages
- S – Seers



A brief comment on each in closing.

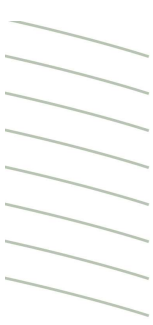
If reduced to selecting one of these five, I would opt for servant leadership. Servant leadership reminds us that the criteria for successful leadership is not what happens to the leader, but what happens to the group they serve. The image of Jesus washing his disciples' feet springs readily to mind. That this takes place only a matter of hours before his arrest and crucifixion is all the more startling. Surely this was a time when Jesus could have expected a little personal pampering. He received none of it. Feet needed to be washed, and it was clear no one else would do it, so he did. He modelled the ethic of serving to the end. Now it is true that we must be willing to serve others in whatever way is most helpful, but don't forget, that for servant leaders, that is most frequently through your leadership. We serve via leading. You serve our institutions by making sure that your libraries are rich resources inviting people to read, to think, to reflect, and to challenge their practice in the light of the global conversation around the Christian faith. Never underestimate the contribution made when that is done well.

As shepherds we remember that the people we lead, guide and direct, matter. They are people. They need nurture, help and encouragement. The student who is overwhelmed by the wide array of texts they are confronted with needs your time and guidance. And it needs to be thoughtful guidance, ideally based on a growing relationship. While ultimately it is up to the student to decide what they will read, you can be a wise friend, pointing out a direction that is helpful. To the international student bewildered as they try to understand theology in a new language, you can sometimes point to some alternate texts that could make a difference. Libraries are not anonymous places where individual learners quietly set about finding useful pieces of information. They are filled with perplexed seekers after truth... and with students who want the easiest text that will ensure a pass grade... and with students who feel they don't really belong and who are spending a little too much time in the library, as it safeguards them from having to converse with peers they don't feel fully comfortable with. They are all there... and you are called to exercise quiet leadership by making a difference by shepherding those within your orbit.

The leader as steward is often a challenge. Actually, we do have to ensure value for money. We do have to be accountable in the resources we track down. Most of our theological libraries are relatively small. At a conference like this I hope it will be possible to foster relationships and collaborative links that make it possible to ensure that even the smallest of our libraries has access to so much more, because we are there for one another, helping to make sure that rare and often expensive resources need not be endlessly duplicated, but that we can find ways of sharing through innovative collaboration.

I'd like to challenge you as librarians to be sages – genuinely wise people. Your task is not simply to get others to read and reflect, it is to read and reflect deeply yourself. Your institutions are filled with specialists – they read deeply on a limited range of topics – and that is appropriate for that is the nature of their task and discipline. But your task is to read widely – to be interested in everything, and to be able to share insights on a wide range of topics. I don't know if you think of yourself as being a sage – but genuine





wisdom is in short supply. The students at our theological colleges are usually caring and thoughtful people. But most often they are younger than we are. And they are looking for role models and wise guides. Why not add sage to the list of ways in which you hope to make a difference.

The last S word is “seer” – the leader as one who has a sense of what the future will hold, and of what will be needed to ensure that the future is better than the past. While we must live in the present, we should do so in a way that is well informed by the past, and with a tilting towards the future. In other words, we should not be kicking and fighting change, but looking at ways to herald it in in the most God honouring and life affirming way possible. Courage belongs to the people of God. The people of God need never be afraid of the future, for they know that ultimately the future belongs to God.

So here we are, at the ANZTLA 2017 conference, and over the next few days we will focus on the related themes of transformation, innovation and collaboration. They are hugely important themes. If we take each seriously, and find ways to implement our findings, we can help to shape a different future. And my hope for each of you is that you will see yourself, in one way or another, as being a leader in this change process. If you do that in a charismatic and colourful way – wonderful, but if for you the path to leadership is through quiet and careful reflection, persistently and tenaciously using the positions you hold and the influence you carry to alter the eventual outcomes for your institutions and communities you serve, that is every bit as wonderful. And if in the midst of the different leadership roles you carry you face the usual cluster of challenges, crisis, complexity, betrayal, loneliness and weariness, breathe deeply, and remember that God most truly knows and understands your situation – and is perhaps calling you to live a life a little less ordinary, one that actually makes rather a difference...

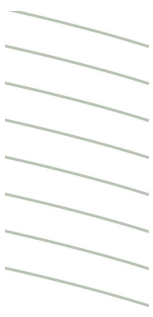
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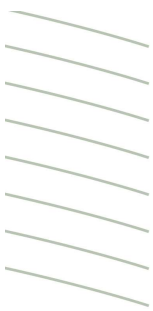
Dr Brian Harris, ANZTLA Conference, Perth,  
2017

Leading Quietly: Widening the Circle of  
Influence



A principle...



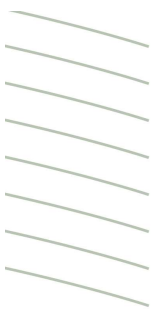


## The starfish principle...



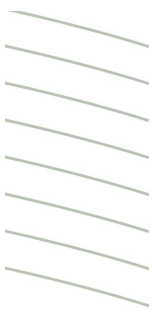
## Quiet Leadership

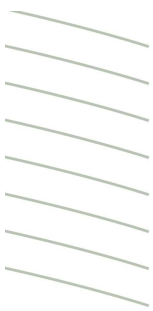




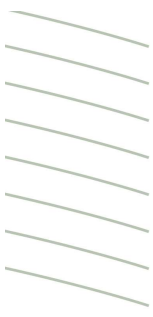
## Four Views on Leadership











## Joseph Badaracco, Leading Quietly

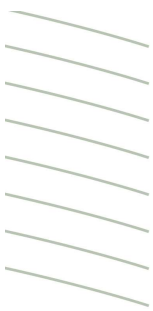
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## Joseph Badaracco, Leading Quietly

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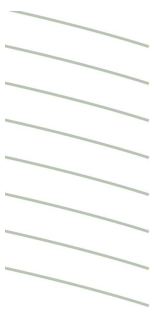
Allender, Leading with a Limp, 5 Key Leadership Challenges

Crisis  
Complexity  
Betrayal  
Loneliness  
Weariness



Complexity: Exodus 1 as an Ethical Dilemma





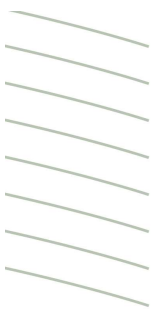
## The Leader as Servant



## The Leader as Shepherd

A Shepherd Will:	A Cowboy Will:
Lead his sheep	Drive his cows
Stay with the sheep	Visit the cows to check on them
Take his sheep to good feed and water	Expect his cows to find good feed and water
Know his sheep individually	Tag his cows to identify them as his
Fight to protect his sheep	Kill whatever kills his cows (afterwards)
Go after the lost sheep	Expect to eventually find the lost cow
Has a following (his sheep)	Has cows, who try and avoid being bothered by him



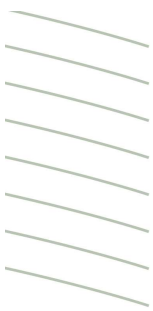


## The Leader as Steward



## The Leader as Sage





The Leader as See'er



You, the quiet leader...

