Avoiding Control, yet Exerting Influence:
Top Tools for Advanced Disciple-Making

The Evangelical Christian world has been rocked by leadership scandals in recent years. We have become more aware of self-centred, toxic, or even abusive forms of leadership, and the devastating effects this has on the body of Christ. This session will explore how we can seek to influence the lives of others and the people we lead while avoiding some key pitfalls and problems for Christian leaders.

Marcus Honeysett is the director of Living Leadership. Living Leadership trains, disciples, and provides soul care for church leaders in the UK and beyond through its networks and associates, and by serving other ministries who share the same aims. Living Leadership provides mentoring, residentials, courses, online opportunities for nurture, and a leadership school in partnership with Above Bar Church in Southampton. Its vision is for flourishing leaders in disciple-making churches. Marcus has authored 5 books, most recently "Powerful Leaders? - When Christian Leadership Goes Wrong and How to Prevent It". Marcus is married to Ros. They have a football-mad eight-year-old.

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 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."

Mark 10:41-45

I.   What types of power do we have to control situations and people?

II.   Understanding the slippery slope

III.   The dangers of soft power (influence)

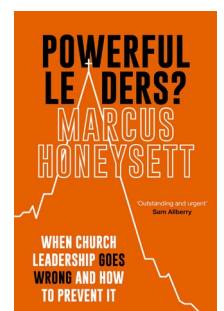IV.   "Audit of Abuse of Power" (see handout)

AUDIT OF ABUSE OF POWER

Powerful leaders? An audit for churches and Christian organizations

To explore these ideas in more depth, buy *Powerful Leaders?* by Marcus Honeysett. Published February 2022 in paperback (160 pages, ISBN 978 1 78974 322 7) and ebook (978 1 78974 345 6) from IVP Books UK.

Available through your local Christian bookshop, online and direct from: ivpbooks.com/powerful-leaders

POWERFUL LEADERS?
MARCUS HONEYSETT

'Outstanding and urgent'
Sam Allberry

WHEN CHURCH
LEADERSHIP GOES
WRONG AND HOW
TO PREVENT IT

ivp

Terms

Power – the ability to act

Authority – the right to act

Five foundations of biblical, spiritual leadership

1   It is a spiritual gift for the common good.

2   It is for building up the body in maturity, love and effectiveness.

3   Leaders work with people for their progress and joy in the faith, so that they glory in Jesus.

4   It is exercised through teaching, shepherding, modelling and spiritual parenting.

5   Leaders lead out of weakness, not strength.

Four critical features that help us to avoid misuse of power and position

1   Accountability

2   Plurality

3   Transparency

4   Embodiment in the local church community

Legitimate and illegitimate leadership – a spectrum of five categories

Legitimate and legitimated leadership

1　Formal legitimate authority

2　Informal, relational legitimate authority

Illegitimate leadership

3　Illegitimate other-serving authority

4　Illegitimate self-serving authority

5　The most serious abuses

Coercive leadership practices

Coercive leaders dominate and dismantle structures to ensure control

Subtle control

- Creating dependency on themselves with people who allow them greater access to authority, or whom they can put in positions of influence and subsequently control.

More obvious strategies for control of structures of organizational governance and authority

- Controlling all boards, agendas and church programmes.
- Privately arranging predefined outcomes with close associates.
- Manipulating preferred candidates into leadership positions and removing unwanted ones.
- Establishing executive groups that remove accountability from legitimate bodies such as trustees or elders, disempowering them from fulfilling their

oversight role (this is not a general comment on teams and teamwork, but on the specific case of groups being used to avoid scrutiny).

- Insisting on obedience to supposed God-given mandates.
- Refusing evaluation of leaders' work by others.

Coercive leaders dominate and dismantle people to ensure control

More subtle control tactics for marginalizing opposition

- Silencing others by denying they have the necessary insight or experience to contribute.
- Manipulation through easy apology, insincere praise or suggestions that they have merely been misconstrued.
- Passive aggression.
- Faux-vulnerability.
- Hyper-sensitivity in areas where leaders have made mistakes.
- Inability to admit sin and failure, apologize or repent (for fear of reputational damage).

More aggressive means of domination and dismantling

The following strategies become more obviously designed actively to diminish people by wounding, traumatizing or eliminating them.

Leaders empower themselves by:

- making themselves inaccessible except to the inner circle;
- evading standard processes and protocols, especially ones to do with accountability: annual reviews and negligence, grievance or conflict-of-interest policies;
- ensuring any evaluation or investigation of themselves is neither independent nor impartial;

- actively covering tracks, lying, deceit;
- identifying outside threats that can only be met by themselves – the worse the threat, the more power they may be permitted to consolidate;
- grooming both victims and those who can provide cover or alibis.

Leaders destabilize others by:

- isolating and siloing people so they can be more easily dominated, perhaps by discouraging or forbidding others to speak to them;
- ridiculing or silencing opposition;
- attacking credibility, labelling those who don't buy into the vision as lacking vision, faith, commitment or competence;
- expressing anger or disappointment in a way that puts people down and humiliates;
- blame-shifting: 'I'm so disappointed you would think that' (i.e. 'It's you, not me; you misunderstand the situation/me; you lack the necessary facts or judgment');
- implying the victim is the guilty party: 'I'm so sad that the relationship with that person has broken down, but it's their fault, not mine';
- refusing access to communication channels for those who wish to express concerns to the church;
- ostracizing people who express concerns, or making life hard for their family and friends;
- gaslighting;
- casting doubt on people's character, emotional stability or sanity, thus stigmatizing them;
- utilizing non-disclosure agreements.

A useful acronym from the world of psychology and trauma studies is **DARVO**. The aggressor:

- **D**enies that anything is wrong;
- **A**ttacks the challenger;
- **R**everses **V**ictim and **O**ffender.

What next for leaders? Moving towards healthiness

'Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.'
(Psalm 51:10–12)

Questions for honest self-review and peer-review

What safeguards would be strong enough to guard you and others against your worst self?

- Do I genuinely put the interests of others first, considering them better than myself (Philippians 2:3–4)?

- Do I actively seek checks and balances on my leadership? Do I welcome review of my leadership? If not, why not?

- Do I co-opt people who will support me unthinkingly? Or do I choose those who are dependent on me or in an unequal power dynamic that would make it unlikely they could ever question my decisions?

- How would I know if I was going wrong? How easy is it for people to tell me?

- Do I insist that church policies and procedures are strong and clear enough to hold me accountable?

- Do I willingly recuse myself when I have a conflict of interest?

- Do I make myself transparent with team and church officers?

- Do I enfranchise and equip people to play a full part in the team, or am I threatened when others are more gifted or competent than I am?

- Do I have to appear successful to the church to protect myself from feelings of vulnerability or inadequacy?

- Am I ever tempted to lie to cover up mistakes or deceive in order to disguise how I am trying to get my own way?

- Am I ever tempted to use DARVO defences (deny, attack, reverse victim and offender) to protect myself?

- If someone raises a serious issue about my leadership practice or integrity, is my instinct to listen, to excuse myself or to silence or refuse to interact with them? Will they get a fair hearing or not?

- In such circumstances would I welcome impartial and independent scrutiny, and possibly arbitration? Or would I try to determine how adjudication processes operate, making sure any investigation is biased to my own advantage?

What if I have gone wrong?

- What terrors would Satan use most easily against me to prevent me acknowledging, confessing and repenting of sin?

- Do I secretly believe there is nothing I can do that should mean I have to step out of leadership?

- Do I try to look repentant while carrying on unchanged?

- What fear or pride would cause reluctance to repent?

- What would tempt me to carry on covering up? What do I think I gain by doing so?

- Am I willing to make myself functionally accountable to others and allow them to make decisions concerning my ministry?

- Who can help me?

What next for churches? Moving towards healthiness

'We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.'
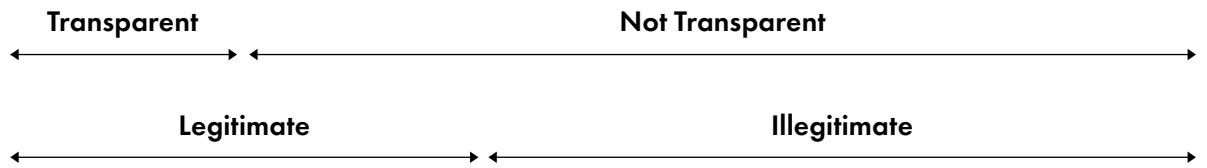(2 Corinthians 4:2)

Questions for corporate review

- Is your church culture conducive to the spiritual health of leaders? Does an atmosphere of grace make repentance easy for them? Or do toxic culture, heavy burdens, expectations of results, a culture of over-work and lack of affection encourage spiritual unhealthiness?

- Is there anything in the leadership of your church that you know you are allowing, excusing, defending or minimizing because it would be too painful or difficult to examine or challenge it?

- What would constitute over-reach of leader authority in your church?

- How easy or hard does your church culture make it for leaders to repent?

- In actual practice, does your church culture value the principles of leader accountability, transparency and plurality?

- Is this reflected in structures and policies? If so, how? If not, where are the gaps?

- Are your policies, procedures, boundaries and codes of best practice clear and robust enough that they could be used to investigate the most

senior leaders? Or could abusive leaders find ways to use their relational capital to evade scrutiny?

- Do you have clear, regularly reviewed and used policies on
    - safeguarding;
    - the scope and authority of leadership roles;
    - the operation of teams;
    - leader reviews;
    - electronic communication and social media;
    - conflict of interests;
    - expenses;
    - expectations on volunteers;
    - disciplinary matters;
    - grievance issues;
    - whistle-blowing?
- Are your procedures, policies and standard protocols implemented in transparent and collegially accountable ways?
- Are you confident that your most senior leaders are appropriately accountable for their use of power and authority? What mechanisms undergird your confidence?
- Does your team always acquiesce to the most senior leader? Do they always get their own way?
- How would a whistle-blower be treated in your church?
- Does your church seem to lose staff or volunteer leaders too frequently? Is there any underlying pattern? Is the role of senior leaders in this ever scrutinized?
- Do senior leaders actively help the church put in place checks and balances on their leadership?

- Do you have a clear policy by which leaders could be disciplined or, as a last resort, disqualified?

- Were leaders to abuse their power and position in your church, what would repentance, action and restitution look like?

- In your church, whose responsibility is it to consider these things?
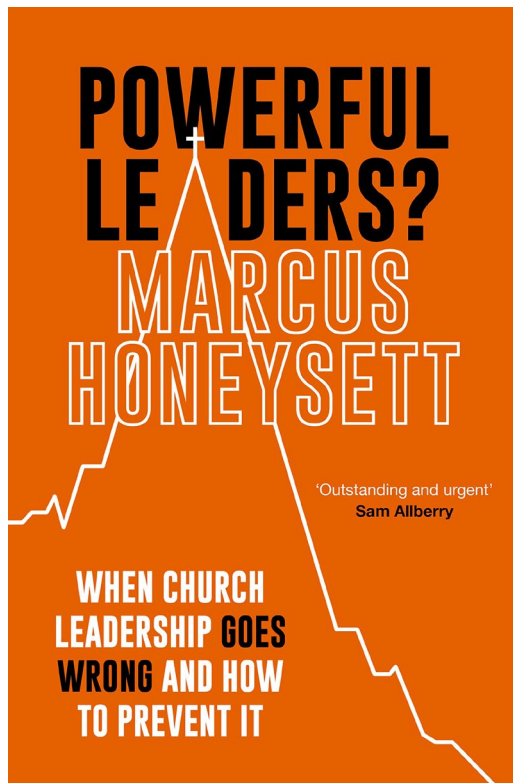
Audit of abuse of power

	Transparent		Not Transparent		
	Legitimate		Illegitimate		
Type of power	Legitimated power; responsibly exercised in a godly way, formally with accountability and transparency	Legitimated power; responsibly exercised in a godly way, relationally by soft power and influence	Other-serving coercive power	Self-serving coercive power	The most serious abuses
For whose benefit is it exercised?	Transparently serving others	Non-transparently serving others	Believes it is serving others, but exceeds authority to do so	Serving self	Serving self at the expense and harm of others, in premeditated way
What characterizes the leader?	1 The leader actively seeks and embraces accountability, plurality and, transparency, and actively promotes and supports checks and balances 2 The leader is corporate, collegial and, actively empowers others 3 The leader has a clear understanding of what the role includes and the limits of the role	1 The leader is not attempting to serve self, but is less open to transparency and accountability 2 The leader is highly relational, working largely on trust, personal credibility and pastoral relationships 3 The leader is hard to disagree with because of a high degree of relationship	1 The leader evades or avoids transparency and accountability 2 The leader works to increase their authority, believing it to be in the best interests of the mission or of others 3 The leader uses soft relational power to extend the limits of their formal authority 4 The leader makes themselves indispensable 5 The leader lobbies others privately outside of formal leadership structures 6 The leader sees power as a tool for serving others 7 Controlling the outcomes of decision-making is important. 8 The leader is unlikely to admit mistakes or demonstrate public repentance, or only in superficial ways	1 The leader exceeds their authority knowingly, to advance or protect themselves 2 The leader demands loyalty and feels threatened by disagreement 3 Control is very evident. Nobody can hold the leader to account without risk to themselves 4 The leader works actively to dismantle plurality, destabilize and disempower others and gather power 5 The leader actively creates dependency on themselves 6 Self-protective and self-promoting behaviours become evident	1 The leader is characterized by domination, discrimination, exploitation, intimidation and attacking anyone who threatens their vision, position or reputation 2 The leader creates and abuses power imbalances through use of position, personality, platform, public profile 3 The leader may use apparently spiritual justifications and claims of God-given authority 4 There is active concealment, deceit, lying, inducement, threats and harm 5 The leader winsomely cultivates some people who act as cover and alibi, providing plausible deniability should they ever be caught out

Type of power	Legitimated formal power	Legitimated relational power	Other-serving coercive power	Self-serving coercive power	The most serious abuses
What characterizes church culture?	1 The church is clear about how power works and which decisions lie with whom 2 Church policies are strong and clear enough to be applied to the most powerful by the weakest 3 A grace-filled and loving environment means that robust disagreement can take place without it disrupting love and unity	1 Structures leave the leader regularly operating in a less plural way. Eldership or equivalent is downplayed, minimizing plurality in decision-making and functioning accountability 2 The leader exercises a great deal of one-to-one ministry where there is a degree of positional and personality power 3 Strong respect for the leader can tip into unquestioning deference 4 Little or no programme for staff review; any review concentrates on task rather than spiritual health	1 The leader actively brings people who cannot threaten them into leadership positions 2 There is a significant burden of expectation on the leader from the congregation, and strong culture of blame when things go wrong 3 Elders decide all outcomes and then work on individuals and structures to secure the result 4 Business meetings are characterized by blessing the plans of the elders by a passive congregation 5 A grace-less environment discourages leaders from showing vulnerability or weakness, or confessing sin	1 Leaders deliberately reinforce their own position by illegitimate means 2 Leaders dismantle and remove unwanted voices while manipulating their own candidates into positions of authority 3 Leaders regard dissent as lack of loyalty and personal attack 4 Access is refused to people who wish to raise concerns 5 Safeguarding frameworks are weak, or do not consider abuse of power and position 6 Members don't know how to report concerns, or are discouraged from doing so	1 Strength is celebrated 2 The personal spiritual health of leaders is never considered, but taken for granted 3 Leaders take all decisions and exercise all authority, unquestioned 4 Questioning is a cause for sanctions, threats and punishments 5 Perceived disloyalty is met with excommunication 6 An environment of fear pervades, perhaps disguised as robust pursuit of God-given vision 7 Staff are subject to non-disclosure agreements

Type of power	Legitimated formal power	Legitimated relational power	Other-serving coercive power	Self-serving coercive power	The most serious abuses
Other features	1 The leaders' methodology is corporate and collegial, actively empowers others and usually accepts when things don't go their way. It is in the light and open to scrutiny	1 Highly relational, one to one, less open to scrutiny, but godly when examined 2 Personal likeability is more powerful than formal leadership structures. Relational capital makes leaders hard to disagree with	1 Leaders use informal power manipulatively to buy formal authority. Use of power resources to increase position and influence 2 Legitimate oversight and structures of collegiality are overridden or evaded. Power and control shift from legitimate plural structures to powerful individual leaders 3 Leaders chair all boards; all decision-making finally goes through them 4 Due process, checks and balances and standard protocols are circumvented 5 Transparency starts to be actively replaced with privacy 6 Disagreement with the leader starts to be loaded with negative consequences 7 Any admission of failure is combined with 'fauxnerability' – fake vulnerability, a control mechanism that uses empathy to appeal for sympathy 8 Powerful personality combined with institutional position makes disagreement very difficult 9 Implicit or explicit inducements for support, and threats of disenfranchisement for disagreement	1 Deliberate control, destabilization or disempowerment of gifted people who might threaten the leader 2 Active replacement of functioning plurality with an inner circle 3 Any accountability happens with people less influential than the leader 4 Necessary privacy becomes secrecy, actively ensuring you can't be found out 5 Aggressive defensiveness and inability to admit failures 6 Lying, deceit and silencing opposition 7 Victim-blaming transference: 'I am disappointed that you would think that' (i.e. 'It's you, not me') 8 Transferring blame for sins and failures on to wider cultures	1 Active harm, deliberate concealment with threats

Type of power	Legitimated formal power	Legitimated relational power	Other-serving coercive power	Self-serving coercive power	The most serious abuses
Practices or culture that may indicate a church is in an 'at-risk' category	N/A	1 Too much personalized power resting on individuals who are not accountable to good practice and policy 2 Prizing innovation above clear procedures designed to undergird integrity of practice 3 Centralization of power in paid staff 4 When all elders are one gender (commonly male), meaning women may feel less safe reporting abuses of power 5 When staff members and elders don't carefully report all necessary relevant decisions or pastoral information to legitimate non-staff leaders 6 When eldership is young and dependent on older staff leaders. 7 No female leaders in any role, creating risk of domineering male culture 8 Policies and procedures not maintained, reviewed and used to a high standard, especially safeguarding policies	1 Employment practices not meeting high, transparent standards 2 Members' meetings are conflict-averse out of fear or over-deference 3 Elders are young, but find it difficult to acknowledge inexperience or lack of expertise 4 Main leaders are expected to be the focus of every aspiration and criticism, and are expected to wield all the power and solve every problem 5 Leaders being people-pleasers, either through being conflict-averse or by seeking affirmation for delivering what the people want 6 Policies and procedures being unclear to members, especially regarding grievance, discipline, whistle-blowing and what can be expected by way of pastoral practice 7 No documentation outlining respective roles and expectations of members, elders (and equivalent), trustees, staff 8 No clear accountability mechanisms for leaders 9 No counselling services for the church to refer pastoral difficulties to when they exceed local expertise	1 No codes of conduct or ways of working for leaders 2 No code of conduct for leaders working alone with individuals 3 Non-transparent recruitment of lay leaders 4 No review or evaluation of leaders	1 Leaders not accountable to policies, procedures and standard protocols, if they even exist 2 No transparency or collegiality in decision-making 3 Unquestioning deference to the God-given calling of the leader 4 Features that bear the hallmarks of a cult: • Entirely concentrated power and authority • Totalizing vision with penalties for dissent; • Charismatic leaders who have all the key ideas through claimed special access to God • Heavy demands on total commitment of time, energy, money and thought from followers • Strong tribal boundaries that discourage transgression with threat of loss of community and friends • Enforced behaviours • A culture of secrecy

Type of power	Legitimated formal power	Legitimated relational power	Other-serving coercive power	Self-serving coercive power	The most serious abuses
What in the leader may place the church at risk?	N/A	1 The leader working alone in many one-to-one situations, the nature of which isn't known to anyone else 2 The leader working in one-to-ones without a clear code of practice that is shared with the recipient of the ministry 3 The leader placing a high value on personal loyalty and relational investment in individuals	1 The leader accruing a high degree of relational power and personal loyalty that is never examined or discussed 2 The leader using personal relational power to get their way on key decisions	1 The leader deliberately avoiding or marginalizing people they find difficult 2 The leader being responsible for making all junior leadership appointments unaccountably 3 Any pattern of removal or dismissal of staff, members or other leaders who challenge the main leader in any way, or who are more gifted	
Moving the church towards health	1 Ensuring that appropriate policies are well drafted, regularly reviewed, publicly accessible and adhered to 2 Church members have a good understanding of how authority works and how leaders may be held to account 3 Ensuring safeguarding teams are robust enough to be able to challenge leaders where necessary 4 Ensuring women have a safe way to raise concerns in a church that takes a male-only position on eldership 5 Ensuring clarity on where pastorally sensitive information is shared. E.g. if someone shares with an elder, should they expect the elder's spouse to know?	1 Depersonalize decision-making away from lone individuals to healthy, plural leadership 2 Ensure that a single person doesn't chair every board and run every ministry; divest decisions to appropriately qualified teams. If there aren't people with the appropriate qualification, should that ministry be running? 3 Ensure that spiritual health, Bible and prayer are regularly prioritized at all leaders' meetings 4 Safeguarding to be a standard item on agendas 5 Clear job descriptions for paid and lay leaders 6 Clarity for members on the role and scope of paid leaders, elders, deacons, PCC members, trustees, teams and team leaders, etc.	1 Church to depersonalize problems and complaints away from sole main leaders to plural structures for handling them 2 Church to have succession plan for leaders, so they never fear a main leader leaving 3 Main leader must not have a monopoly on pastoral one-to-one work with all influential individuals 4 Robust conflict-of-interest policies and ensuring main leaders recuse themselves in areas of decision-making in which they have personal vested interests or in which their presence might create unhealthy pressure and power dynamics 5 Clarity for the church about how safeguarding officers and elders/trustees/staff relate 6 Clear employment policies	1 Decision-making processes on significant matters for the church to be scrutinized by elders 2 Clarity for the church on how decision-making processes work 3 Clear policies and procedures concerning lone-working, especially with vulnerable adults 4 All leaving members and staff to have a standard exit interview with non-staff elders, in which they could reveal any hidden practice or behaviour of leaders that has forced them to leave 5 All staff to have a line-manager and someone who cares for them pastorally, so that professional accountability is not confused with personal pastoral need	1 Church policy that it will never enter into a non-disclosure agreement 2 Church policy that it will never create conditions that will require it to cover up for power abuse by leaders 3 Church policy on how, as a final resort, leaders can be disciplined or removed 4 Church to consider how it may access external help when need arises
Moving the leader towards health	1 Provision of professional ministry supervision.	1. Regular staff reviews for accountability, including spiritual life of the leader 2. Staff to have one person managing them and another supporting them	1 Leaders to have training on understanding power dynamics, especially on becoming more self-aware of how soft power can be misused		

POWERFUL LEADERS?
WHEN CHURCH LEADERSHIP GOES WRONG AND HOW TO PREVENT IT

By Marcus Honeysett

How do Christian leaders end up abusing power, even though many begin with good intentions? More importantly, how can we prevent it?

Powerful Leaders? exposes and explores how people in positions of authority can be tempted away from a biblical model of leadership into an illegitimate – and, in the worst cases, abusive – use of power. Drawing on his years of experience working with leaders and congregations, Marcus Honeysett traces how those in power in the church can move along a spectrum of healthy to unhealthy uses of authority and position, and offers practical wisdom to prevent this from happening.

Whether you are in leadership or in a position to hold leaders accountable, this book will challenge and equip you to be more aware of the dynamics of power – and enable you to take the necessary steps forward to create healthier church cultures in which everyone can thrive.

Marcus Honeysett is the director of Living Leadership, a charity that focuses on healthy leadership and church culture. He speaks regularly to groups of leaders and church leadership teams, and is the author of *Fruitful Leaders*, *Finding Joy* and *Meltdown* (all IVP), and co-author of *Gospel-Centred Preaching* with Tim Chester (Good Book Company).

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