

Discussion Questions for *Management by Proverbs*, 2nd Edition



Introduction: Why Manage by Proverbs?

- A. This chapter opened with a synopsis of a few management theories. What's your basic theory of how to manage people? And why have you adopted that particular theory?
- B. What, if anything, did you learn about the interpretation of proverbs in this chapter?
- C. Have you ever seen a looseness in the way these scriptures have been interpreted? That is, have you seen people "read into" individual proverbs some lessons that are not really there? Why does this matter?
- D. What do you think of the concept of interpreting proverbs as probabilities, not certainties? If scripture is God's inspired truth, then why would these scriptures not reveal certainties in life?

Part I. Lay a Personal Foundation for Success

1. Devote Your Work to the Real Boss

- A. What is the purpose of your work? That is, why do you do it? Do you consider it primarily a secular activity, or do you view your work as a sacred ministry?
- B. What motivates you to work hard? To what extent is "serving God" a motivator in your work life?
- C. Working for God as our Boss is reasonably basic theology, and many Christians would affirm it, but in practice it can be a challenge. What are your challenges to maintaining this mindset throughout your workday? And what can you do to more consistently remain mindful that you are working for God?
- D. What is your definition of success? How do you think that compares to God's definition of success?

2. Prioritize Family over Work

- A. Which is greater: The amount of time you think about family when you're working, or the amount of time you think about

work when you're with your family? If it's the latter, does that imply anything about your priorities?

- B. What do you do to balance work and family time? How do you ensure that family remains a *higher* priority for you than your work?
- C. Do you manage in a way that encourages your employees to put family before work? How sensitive are you to employee familial needs when considering requests for time off, for scheduling changes, for pay raises, or for other family-related accommodations?
- D. How family-friendly is your organization, and what can you do to make it more family-friendly?

3. Be Humble

- A. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis called pride a “spiritual cancer,” “the complete anti-God state of mind,” and “the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.” It’s also probably the chief cause of misery in every workplace since the world began. Since we’re all susceptible to this, what manifestations of pride do you see in your leadership and in you work life generally?
- B. Drs. Carter and Minrith of the Minrith-Meier clinic in Richardson, Texas – a Christian-based counseling organization – have helpfully compiled the following ten-item quiz to help us measure to what extent we struggle with pride (*The Anger Workbook*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, pp. 118-119). How many of the following ten statements are true of you?
 1. I tend to speculate about why people are not as considerate as I think they should be
 2. When someone is insensitive, I let it bother me more than it really should
 3. Impatience or edginess overcomes me when people act incompetently
 4. Sometimes I fantasize about what life would be like if I could have ideal circumstances
 5. My moods tend to rise and fall, depending on how others show me respect
 6. When I express my opinions, I am disgruntled if the other person does not receive them well
 7. I am known for having a strong personality
 8. When I witness something good in another persons’ life, my initial reaction is to wish for the same thing in my life

9. In social circles I feel the need to keep an unblemished reputation, even if it requires a cover-up
10. I would prefer to avoid disclosures of a personal nature

According to Carter and Minrith, if five or more of those statements describes you, pride has gained a foothold in your life. How did you do?

- C. If you've, in a sense, "failed" the test above (as many leaders do), what can you do to begin to address the pride in your life and to become more humble?

4. Assemble an Accountability Group

- A. To whom are you accountable? Who holds you answerable for leading and managing God's way?
- B. To what extent do you think accountability works to keep us on track and to help us grow?
- C. What sort of accountability arrangement would fit you best: small groups, one-on-one, or some other approach?
- D. If you are studying *Management by Proverbs* with a group of others, are those in the group holding each other accountable for implementing what is being learned? If not, might the group operate this way in the future?

5. Perfect Your People Skills

- A. What people skills practices would you add to the list of twenty in this chapter?
- B. Looking across the twenty practices, in which areas would you like to develop? How do you think you can grow to enjoy more success in these areas?
- C. When you use these people skills practices, are you doing so for the "right" reasons? Do you ever use them in a manipulative or inappropriate manner? Stated differently, do these practices flow out of a loving heart for people, or are they more or less pragmatic, simply a means to a useful end?
- D. Do you have some way to assess your people skills? Many leaders seem to think they're doing much better in this area than they really are, and they remain blind to developmental needs. Do you know some people who can "speak the truth in love" to you here, offering you a candid evaluation?

Part II. Excel at the Essentials

6. Think of Profit as a Means, Not an End

- A. What do you think is the purpose of a business? Traditionally, it is considered an economic entity that exists to maximize value for the owners. Is that primarily what a business is for?
- B. A problem with which many workplace Christians struggle is what we might call “dual allegiance.” We work for God, but we also work for an organization that is paying us to help meet its objectives. When, if ever, has this “dual allegiance” dilemma created tensions for you, and how have you reconciled those tensions?
- C. What is your mindset toward your employees? Do your actions consistently indicate that you think of employees as people entrusted to you by God, or do your actions indicate that you think of them more as means to an end? If your employees were asked that question, what would they say about you?
- D. Would you be willing to permit your employees to offer confidential feedback about how they feel about your leadership?

7. Plan Persistently

- A. Does your organization have a mission statement that helpfully sets priorities and filters new ideas? Do you personally have this sort of mission statement? How important a tool is a mission statement?
- B. When you plan, whether to pursue broad organizational objectives or for individual employee performance, how much input do you seek from others? And how heavily do you weigh that input? Would those around you say that they are empowered to participate in planning and decision-making, and that you take their advice seriously?
- C. Do you have a “balanced scorecard” or something similar to help you assess your organization’s health and to help you measure progress toward goals? This is a very powerful managerial tool. Discuss what yours looks like, or what it might look like if you created one for your organization or work group.
- D. As indicated in the chapter, some Christians struggle with the concept of planning because they worry that too much planning (or for some, *any* significant planning) may somehow usurp their sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s guidance. What do you think about this argument?

8. Design a Decision Tree

- A. Discuss the fruit of hasty decision-making, from your personal experience. If we know that it is unwise to make hasty decisions, why do we sometimes do it anyway?
- B. The chapter discussed one decision-making process that claims to be faithful to scripture. What would you add or subtract here to improve this decision tree?
- C. Do you find yourself leaning more toward individual servanthood or organizational stewardship when making decisions at work? How can you achieve a better balance?
- D. What obstacles inhibit you from making more God-honoring decisions at work, and what can you do to overcome those obstacles?

9. Execute with Excellence

- A. Recall, for a moment, that Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25). Imagine that the servant who returned one talent to the Master said: “Lord, here’s my mission and vision for this talent. Here are my goals and my strategic plan to grow this talent. Now here is your one talent back.” What would the Master’s response have been?
- B. This chapter argued that it pleases God when we get results, when we go beyond the “mere talk” of planning. What is the theology behind this and how does one reconcile that theology with the perspective that the Christian faith is not a works-based faith?
- C. What are your greatest challenges to getting things done, and which of those challenges are controllable? Can you remove these impediments to be a more God-honoring steward of what God has given you at work?

Part III. Build a Competitive Workforce

10. Measure Twice, Hire Once

- A. How much effort do you typically invest in structuring interview questions? Are your questions great measures of future job performance?
- B. How much weight do you give to interviews? That is, to what extent does the interview drive your decision whether to extend an offer?

Is it possible that you, like many leaders, weigh interviews too heavily?

- C. What do you think of the argument that we always need to be on guard against deceptive applicants? Does this somehow imply an un-Biblical lack of trust for people?
- D. How do you measure character in your job applicants?

11. Offer Applicants a Realistic Job Preview

- A. The chapter makes the argument that not offering a realistic job preview (RJP) is tantamount to dishonesty, and dishonesty is something that God “detests.” What do you think of this argument?
- B. Do you think that RJP is one of those practices that we should use only if we think we can afford to use it?
- C. Is it best to offer RJP before people apply for the job, after you have a pool of job applicants, or both (or neither)?
- D. What would you do if, for a certain undesirable job, your candid RJP seems to be chasing away all the decent job candidates, thereby extending the vacancy of the position?

12. Select Carefully Your Management Team

- A. Have you surrounded yourself with wise counselors, or are you “the companion of fools”? Assess your management team and identify what you would like that team to look like one year from now.
- B. How has your team influenced you, both positively and negatively? What have you learned from that experience?
- C. What are your criteria for including someone in your inner circle of leaders/peers? What can you do in the future to ensure even better fit when bringing someone into that group?
- D. Do you have any sort of “grooming” or succession planning process in place to fill vacancies in your management team? What does it look like and how effective is it?

13. Invest in Employee Training

- A. To what extent is training a priority for you? Is this a continuous improvement process for all your employees, or is training more of an ad hoc, “whenever we get around to it” practice?

- B. Jesus was a coach, a full-time trainer for His disciples. He didn't contract out that work and He didn't send them to seminary. He trained them personally, teaching them by word and by example. To what extent do you do the same for your followers?
- C. How can you assess training needs in your organization and how might you measure the return on your training investment?
- D. What are some efficient and cost-effective ways of continually improving your people (for example, an internal mentorship program where long-term employees mentor newer employees)?

Part IV. Cultivate a Culture of Commitment

14. Build Organizational Trust

- A. Aligning interests between management and labor is an age-old challenge, but it is ultimately attainable. How far is your workplace from genuine interest alignment, and what could bridge that gap?
- B. Lincoln Electric is a manufacturing company. But are there lessons from Lincoln's employee management system that are transferable to all organizations?
- C. If some of your employees are not trustworthy, might that be *because of* how they are managed, rather than *despite* how they are managed? What's the real culprit here?
- D. How can you personally build a culture of trust in your work group and perhaps, in your entire organization?

15. Alleviate Employee Stress

- A. Scripture seems to legitimize stress as a motivator, up to a point. To what extent do you use stress to motivate people? And how do you know if this practice has gone too far?
- B. How would your employees characterize the level of stress that they feel in their work?
- C. What proactive steps have you taken in the past to identify and alleviate your employees' stress?
- D. Jesus relieved our stress about eternal life in one astonishing, sacrificial act. With respect to your employees, how can you imitate Jesus and offer some relief to your employees this week?

16. Value Employee Input

- A. Speculate about the reasons the decision-makers in the Challenger disaster ignored the advice of their experts. Have you experienced some of these same pressures and, as a result, ignored the good counsel of those around you?
- B. How do you feel about receiving feedback and ideas from your employees? And how does it make you feel when one of your subordinates has a better idea than you do? Do you celebrate this, or do you feel threatened by it?
- C. Does your feedback system actually generate a lot of great ideas? How might it be improved?
- D. What is the price of failed ideas in your work group or organization? That is, do employees feel free to try out new ideas, or is it costly to them personally to risk being innovative?

17. Develop Employee Careers

- A. To what extent do you feel a responsibility to nurture your employees' careers?
- B. When you meet with employees for their performance reviews, do you do any long-range planning with them to help shape their careers? Could you encourage them to dream a bit in these meetings, and then partner with them to create a pathway to their dreams?
- C. What would your response be to an employee who would like you to pay for training or education that, since it's not for skills that are related to your organization, will likely culminate in him or her eventually leaving the organization?
- D. Would it be possible to create a job rotation or a "grow in place" program in your own organization, similar to the ones described in the chapter?

Part V. Measure and Reward Performance

18. Measure Performance Validly

- A. Discuss what your performance measurement system looks like, where it's valid and where it's not. Share some best practices you've discovered.

- B. Which, if any, of the evaluation biases discussed in this chapter may have taken up residence in your life? And what can you do to combat those biases?
- C. Would it be arduous to get in the habit of keeping some sort of “performance diary” on employees? Do you see any value in this practice?
- D. How do you measure intangible performance? That is, what, if anything, do you do to gauge accurately the achievement of employees whose output is not quantifiable?

19. Deliver Criticism with Care

- A. Delivering criticism is a significant challenge for many people. Are you getting better at delivering negative information to people? If not, how might you develop in this area?
- B. How much time do you usually spend in prayer and other preparation before having a difficult conversation?
- C. The chapter makes the case that an employee’s motives are often hidden from our view (“The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters,” Proverbs 20:5a). To what extent do you assume that you know the reason for an employee’s dysfunctional behavior? Would you benefit from discarding those assumptions before delivering feedback about their behavior?
- D. Discuss the “ten tips for delivering negative feedback” presented in the chapter and add your own best practices to the list.

20. Reward Employees with Praise

- A. What do you think of the argument, advanced in the chapter, that praise is something that we owe to employees?
- B. If you don’t recognize employees’ contributions as much as you probably should, why not? What are the obstacles to making this a habit?
- C. The chapter reveals a powerful technique for making recognition more of a habit – keeping five coins in your pocket. What practical ideas do you have for becoming more of an encourager to those around you at work?
- D. Do you think that some people desire affirmation and recognition more than others? If so, how should this affect the way you manage people?

21. Reward Employees with Profits

- A. Is profit sharing just a nice business idea, or is there a Christian case to be made for sharing profits with employees?
- B. Profit sharing has proven to be effective under certain conditions. How could it work in your organization?
- C. Is there a way to capitalize on the concept of profit sharing in a not-for-profit organization?
- D. From a Biblical perspective, do managers have a responsibility to ensure that employees can live in reasonable and frugal comfort? (For a deeper consideration of this issue, see the online case study, “When a Good Worker is Poor, How Much Do You Pay?”).

Part VI. Control Workplace Conflict

22. Restrain Workplace Gossip

- A. Be honest. With all the other things going on at work, do you think gossip is a big deal? If not, how do you interpret scriptures like those cited in this chapter?
- B. How can you diplomatically extinguish gossip when you hear it in a conversation?
- C. How could a “no gossip” policy be implemented effectively in your organization?

23. Ensure Due Process

- A. What does it mean to ensure due process for employees? What are its elements (e.g., clear communication of the rules, full and fair investigation, similar offenses are treated similarly, etc.)?
- B. What happens in your organization if an employee has a problem or complaint? Is there an accessible grievance or dispute resolution system, or do employees experience roadblocks when seeking to redress problems?
- C. To what extent do you consider resolving employee conflicts part of your role as a leader? What do you personally do when you become aware of a conflict among members of your team?

D. What are your greatest challenges to resolving conflicts and to offering everyone due process at work?

24. Terminate Troublemakers

- A. Is it somehow “un-Christian” to fire someone? What scriptures seem to answer the question differently than you do, and what is your response to those scriptures?
- B. Scripture seems to suggest that firing people because of character problems is legitimate, but what about problems with performance? Does the Bible support termination for poor performance?
- C. If an employee knows that you are a Christian, how can you fire him or her without seeming like a hypocrite, in their eyes?
- D. If you have to layoff people because of economic conditions, what are your criteria for deciding who stays and who goes? (See the *Management by Proverbs* layoff exercise to make this question less abstract).

Epilogue: A Strategy for Continuous Improvement

- A. What is your strategy for “continuous improvement” of your wisdom?
- B. How will you track your progress here?
- C. Do you have anyone who can be an encourager and accountability partner for you?
- D. If you have learned any managerial lessons from your study of this book, how will you make them a permanent part of your management style? What are your next steps?