

Second chair leadership

In this article, Tim Harle describes recent developments around second chair leadership. It is written as much for those occupying the ‘first chair’ as for those in the second chair, which Readers might be expected to occupy.



Clement Attlee’s legacy is seen in Britain’s National Health Service (NHS). His role during World War Two as deputy to Winston Churchill is less well known. What contribution did Attlee make as Deputy Prime Minister? Roy Jenkins describes meetings of the War Cabinet:

‘When Attlee takes the chair, Cabinet meetings are business-like and efficient, we keep to the agenda, make decisions and get away in reasonable time. When Churchill presides, nothing is decided; we listen enthralled and go home, many hours later, feeling that we have been present at an historic occasion.’¹

Although it would take decades for the term to emerge, Attlee’s wartime role is an example of second chair leadership.

The slow growth of second chair leadership

Leading from the Second Chair, by Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson, was published in 2005. Bonem has subsequently written *Thriving in the Second Chair*, which includes a helpful three page Appendix, summarising the earlier book.² These books are based on US churches: this is important in terms of ecclesiology and leadership models. Interest in the UK has grown slowly, but is seen for example in the

work of the Church Pastoral Aid Society (CPAS) around church leadership. Elim launched an annual conference for second chair leaders in 2017, while the Susanna Wesley Foundation addressed second chair leadership as part of its *Leaderful Churches?* conference in 2018. Sarum College’s Centre for Leadership Learning has a growing number of second chair workshops for ordinands and Readers / Licensed Lay Ministers (LLMs).

So who are second chair leaders? The initial answer may look obvious, but the reality is more complex. In the original books, second chair leaders are the various pastors – Teaching, Worship, Youth – and administrators, who work for a Chief, or Executive, Pastor. An Anglican LLM may fit this role. Looking outside churches, examples include a school Deputy Headteacher or Charity Vice-chair.

However, recent trends towards Executive Heads and Multi-Academy Trusts means that a Head of School may now report to an Executive Head. So is the Head of School a first or second chair leader? The answer is both. Suffragan bishops offer another example of simultaneous first and second chair roles.

Although not mentioning the term ‘second chair leader’, Richard Hytner’s *Consiglieri* offers a fascinating insight

from the author’s involvement in business, politics, and beyond. Based on his experience at Saatchi and Saatchi, Hytner distinguishes between accountable leaders, and ‘consiglieri’, who counsel, support and deliver.³

Biblical and theological perspectives

Bonem and Patterson have a clear favourite in scripture: Joseph, who is second chair to Potiphar:

‘You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.’⁴

We can note some other scriptural pairings: Ruth and Naomi, James and John (whose request to sit at Jesus’ side is a good discussion starter), Paul and countless others, from the well-known Timothy to the less well-known Sosthenes. But not all are clear pairs. Moses was supported at different times by Aaron and Joshua. And Mary Magdalene, the ‘apostle to the apostles’, had no obvious first chair, other than Jesus himself.

If I was allowed to offer one theological perspective on second chair leadership, it would be the Social Trinity. The dynamic interpenetration (strictly, *perichoresis*, but often paraphrased as ‘dance’) offers a striking model for all leadership:

In a trinitarian ecclesiology, order is not provided or imposed by a single group, permanently over against another, but by the fluctuating movement in relationship of the personal participants ... In a perichoretic community of love, a self-ordering process takes place in which, although individual persons will fulfil unique and necessary roles, the total ordering is achieved without any one being in a permanently subordinate position to another.⁵

The three paradoxes

Bonem and Patterson highlight three

References

- ¹ Radice, G. (2015) *Odd Couples*, IB Taurus, p.29, quoting Jenkins’ interim (1948) biography of Attlee.
² Bonem, M. and Patterson, R. (2005) *Leading from the Second Chair*, Jossey-Bass. Bonem, M. (2016) *Thriving in the Second Chair*, Abingdon Press.

³ Hytner, R. (2014) *Consiglieri*, Profile Books.

⁴ Genesis 41: 40

⁵ Greenwood, R. (1994) *Transforming Priesthood*, SPCK, p.152.

paradoxes for second chair leaders, which Readers may recognise:

- **Subordinate-leader.** How do you take action, when you are responsible to someone else?
- **Deep-wide.** You may have a narrower scope of authority, but need to retain a broad organisational perspective. This can apply, for example, in a multi-parish benefice.
- **Contentment-dreaming.** You need to work where you are, but nurture personal and organisational dreams.

These paradoxes, especially the first one, draw attention to questions of power and control. These are not always acknowledged: indeed, the most common critique I encounter from second chair leaders goes along the lines of, 'That's all very well, but what do you do when your first chair is a control freak?' There is an opposite, but equally unhelpful, scenario when first chairs abdicate, rather than delegate, responsibility.

Patrick Lencioni's work on team dysfunctions can be helpful here. His modern-day fable peels back the layers from avoiding accountability, through lack of commitment and fear of conflict, to an underlying absence of trust.⁶ This question of trust is crucial.

First and second chairs as part of a team

Earlier I mentioned Churchill and Attlee in the War Cabinet. It would be anachronistic, and something of an oversimplification, to see their relationship in terms of Belbin team roles,⁷ but can we describe Attlee's Co-ordinator in relation to Churchill's Plant? This illustrates the importance of understanding one another's preferences. In practical terms, I have heard a positive example where a vicar has asked someone else to chair a Parochial Church Council (PCC) meeting – offset, I fear, by a counter-example where a newly arrived vicar insisted on chairing a successful PCC, which had been chaired by a churchwarden.

A case study from the NHS, which generates a considerable amount of interest during second chair leadership workshops, comes from the field of cardiac surgery. Amy Edmondson and her colleagues in the US studied the impact of new non-invasive techniques.

Their findings showed that the attitude of the lead surgeon was crucial: a team led by a junior surgeon performed far better than one led by a world-renowned cardiologist. The former admitted they might make a mistake, and asked for the team's support, whereas the latter assumed their role was as a teacher imparting skills.⁸

Edmondson coined the term 'zones of psychological safety' for the safe space, characterised by trust, that were co-created by the surgeons and their teams. She highlights a number of helpful behaviours or attitudes from what we would term first chair leaders. Some are unremarkable – be accessible and approachable, invite participation, use direct language – but others are striking:

- Acknowledge the limits of your current knowledge.
- Be willing to display fallibility.
- Highlight failures as learning opportunities.
- Hold people accountable for their transgressions (note the almost biblical language).

The net result is paradoxical: leaders who acknowledge their limits and demonstrate vulnerability end up with the best teams.

Recent insights for first and second chairs

Existing writing about second chair leadership assumes implicit models of leadership that might be described as individual and hierarchical. Recent work from both sides of the Atlantic offers some disruptive insights to both second and first chair leaders. Before we look at them, it is worth highlighting two points. First, that some of these approaches have developed in the highly ordered environment of the Armed Services. Secondly, that embarking on these methods where trust is absent could be entirely counterproductive. The insights show similarities, even though they were developed separately. We will consider them in two pairs:

- **Constructive dissent and Intelligent disobedience.** Constructive dissent was identified by Keith Grint when he took part in a RAF training course.⁹ He noted how trainees would share their experience in a way which did not always accord with official manuals. He contrasted this with destructive consent, where shared concerns are left unspoken for the sake of superficial harmony. Intelligent disobedience, pioneered by Ira Chaleff, has its roots in observations about how guide dogs are trained on occasion to disobey orders for the sake of their handler's safety. Chaleff was recently invited to speak at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst.¹⁰

- **Inverse learning and Reverse mentoring.** Many parents will recognise the premise of inverse learning: that elders can learn from those younger than themselves. Reverse mentoring is similar, inverting the traditional mentoring relationship to encourage not just skills transfer, but understanding different worldviews (it is sometimes cast as Boomers being mentored by Millennials).¹¹

In conclusion

Second chair leadership is not a precise term, but it offers helpful insights for second and first chairs as they work together. Let me conclude by repeating an invitation I offer to workshop participants. Reflect on an occasion where you experienced a 'second chair' scenario. What expectations were being revealed? How did you react, and how might you react differently in future? And what conversations might help share learning about first and second chair roles?



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References

- ⁶ Lencioni, P. (2002) *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Jossey-Bass.
- ⁷ See www.belbin.com. Other team roles include monitor-evaluator, shaper, and completer-finisher.
- ⁸ Edmondson, A. (2012) *Teaming*, John Wiley. See especially p139.
- ⁹ Grint, K. (2005) *Leadership: Limits and Possibilities*, Palgrave.
- ¹⁰ Chaleff, I. (2015) *Intelligent Disobedience*, Berrett-Koehler. An extract from Chaleff's Sandhurst talk (with a link to the full lecture) is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDJx-5HNHjc>.
- ¹¹ Creps, E. (2008) *Reverse Mentoring*, Jossey-Bass.