One day, I decided to embark on a new kind of Bible study. I would purposefully travel through the whole of Scripture looking for one fresh leadership principle in every book, and I would record them as I went. Some of them were fairly straightforward, but some of them surprised me as contrary to common leadership thought. But even if they sounded odd at first, the biblical principles stood the test of application in my own life. Once again, God’s logic trumps human logic.

At the end of the study, God indeed rewarded me with a treasure trove of concepts for leaders fighting the lions of criticism, anger, people-problems, negativity, pride, and many other issues. Here are my top six discoveries that have made the biggest difference in my daily work.

1. Build the reputation of your critics

During the 1997 Canadian federal election, national news columnist Peter C. Newman found a particularly scathing way to criticize Reform party leader Preston Manning. Manning is “a preacher, not a politician,” Newman said (Newman 1997, 51). The implication was obvious. Preachers are by nature intolerant, impatient, and arrogant. Preachers are “know-it-alls,” dangerous to the citizenry of an enlightened and pluralized public.

“What was I able to do compared to you?” When he said this, their anger against him subsided” (Judg. 8:3).

I was shocked when I found out a colleague had criticized my abilities behind the scenes. I approached him after struggling to distance myself from my initial emotions. Coincidentally, I had just studied the story of Gideon’s response to his own critics, and I decided to try out his technique.

In the book of Judges, Gideon is the weakest member of the weakest clan in his Hebrew tribe, but he is nevertheless chosen by God to save the entire nation of Israel. Gideon marshals 300 troops to chase the enemy Midianite army, calling on surrounding tribes to assist. After a small victory of their own, some of the tribal chiefs complain about missing the glory of Gideon’s main battle. The text says they criticize him “violently.” But rather than respond in kind, he says, “What have I done now compared to you? . . . God handed over to you Oreb and Zeeb, the two princes of Midian. What was I able to do compared to you?” (Judg. 8:1–3).

They want credit for a victory—any victory. And they’ll complain until they get it. When Gideon lifts up their accomplishments over his own, their jealousy and anger subside. Further criticism is silenced. When I tried this with my colleague, we reconciled and he agreed to avoid negative comments in the future.
Gideon’s technique of promoting his critics without diminishing his own accomplishments can be applied in two ways:

1. **Identify their strengths.** When we point out the strengths of a critic in meetings and one-on-one discussions with coworkers, it gets around that you think a lot of him, and he may feel a twinge of guilt when he criticizes you in the future.

2. **Ask for confidential criticism.** Those who sling mud at me in public usually change their tune in private discussions. I’ve found a powerful question when I’m behind closed doors: “Is there anything I can do to improve?” Sometimes this yields a pointer I can actually benefit from, but it also takes wind away from the person’s public bashing. Private comments are easier for me to take, because I’m prepared for them, and they lack the emotion fueled by an audience. Preventing a public confrontation saves embarrassment and defensiveness for everyone. Xerox’s CEO Anne Mulcahy said, “Stay approachable. Surround yourself with a group of good critics. It’s the biggest gift you can get.”

Constant criticism can devastate corporate culture. When left unchecked, they *define* the culture. A culture of humility, however, is defined by Gideon’s uncommon tactic of lifting up his critics.

2. **Don’t argue—ever**

> “An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins” *(Prov. 29:22 NIV).*

The Bible teaches we should debate without quarreling. Debate and argumentation are opposites, though they both rely on conflict. The former assumes we have the same objective, the latter assumes we’re out to dominate the other. When I argue with you, I want only what *I* want; when we debate, you and I want the same thing. The skilled leader knows how to turn back an argument to a debate, and to prevent a debate from becoming an argument. He also knows how to handle the slippery reptile called conflict.

Why do so many leaders rely on harsh argumentation? Proverbs reveals the folly of dominating others with words, of establishing authority with anger. The following principles should govern our meetings, relationships, and discussions—indeed, *all* human interaction.

*Someone who sounds right all the time probably isn’t.* If a persuasive person monopolizes a meeting, many participants will become quiet and agreeable, but harbor silent resistance. “The first to state his case seems right until another comes and cross-examines him” *(Prov. 18:17).*

*Control your temper.* Robert E. Lee said, “I cannot trust a man to control others who cannot control himself.” Here are a few verses regarding anger:

> “A hot-tempered man stirs up conflict, but a man slow to anger calms strife” *(Prov. 15:18).*
> “Patience is better than power, and controlling one’s temper, than capturing a city”
(Prov. 16:32).
“The intelligent person restrains his words, and one who keeps a cool head is a man of understanding” (Prov. 17:27).
“A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man holds it in check” (Prov. 29:11).

Don’t protect someone from the consequences of his or her anger. “A person with great anger bears the penalty; if you rescue him, you’ll have to do it again” (Prov. 19:19).

Reconciliation revives and energizes people. “The tongue that heals is a tree of life, but a devious [deceitful] tongue breaks the spirit” (Prov. 15:4).

Cut off arguments before they escalate. “To start a conflict is to release a flood; stop the dispute before it breaks out” (Prov. 17:14).

Disassociate from chronically angry people as far it depends on you. “Don’t make friends with an angry man, and don’t be a companion of a hot-tempered man, or you will learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare” (Prov. 22:24–25).

Be quiet and take care with every word. “The one who guards his mouth and tongue keeps himself out of trouble” (Prov. 21:23).

When jealousy enters the ring, the fight’s gone too far. Jealousy is one of the most powerful emotions we humans contend with. It has a more far-reaching effect on us than even anger. “Fury is cruel, and anger is a flood, but who can withstand jealousy?” (Prov. 27:4).

Don’t let people talk long in meetings. In fact, all communication should be brief or at least broken into chunks. Effusive monologues are often plagued with manipulation, argumentation, pride, or dishonesty. Long-windedness can foster resistance and resentment if listeners don’t have a chance to respond along the way. “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise” (Prov. 10:19 NIV).

Be quiet to appear wise. The above verse says it well, and so does this one: “Even a fool is considered wise when he keeps silent, discerning when he seals his lips” (Prov. 17:28).

Don’t overreact to the leader’s anger. Defensiveness and angry responses only incite those in authority to increase their intensity. “A king’s fury is a messenger of death, but a wise man appeases it. When a king’s face lights up, there is life; his favor is like a cloud with spring rain” (Prov. 16:14–15).

Argumentation is driven by anger; debate, by reason and conviction. The best debaters engage in healthy conflict in pursuit of truth and wisdom. Too many leaders, however, think they’re in the gladiator arena fending off hungry lions.

3. Motivate your people less
“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go again; show love to a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the Israelites though they turn to other gods’” (Hos. 3:1).

Many leaders who rely on motivation to get their people to produce are like medicine that loses its efficacy over time. Higher dosages, including more valuable rewards, may be required to get the same effect. One leader I know spent years pushing his employees with high-energy meetings, grand incentives, and impassioned persuasion. The staff turnover and personal burnout left his people and him longing for a less tiresome method.

The alternative to intentional motivation programs is long-term, self-generated motivation. I’m not advocating abandonment of positive feedback or reward programs, but here we’ll explore the underlying force behind motivation that many leaders don’t understand: love.

Maxie Hays coached football and track in Louisiana for four decades, winning statewide coach of the year. His desire to coach blossomed under his own father-figure coach, Curtis Cook. Hays said, “Coach Cook was my biggest inspiration to become a coach because of the type of person he was. We all loved him. . . . He expected the best from us, and he was the only coach I’ve ever been around who let his quarterbacks call the plays in a football game.”

One of Hays’s star athletes, Charles Johnson, later played in the NFL. He recalls Hays’s fatherly style, giving his players the responsibility of improving their own skills during practice, rather than micro-coaching their every move. How did Hays inspire his teams to win so often? The driver of his motivational style was rooted in one thing: “I made sure the student-athletes knew I loved and cared about ’em,” said Hays.

Love for coworkers naturally expresses itself in compliments and recognition. The best rewards are tailored to the interests of individual employees, not given in mass-appeal fashion. If my boss knows I love skiing, a gift certificate to the outfitters means more to me than a cash-filled envelope in the same amount.

New York Giants’ coach Tom Coughlin was almost fired for his lack of love before the 2008 NFL season. Though he had delivered plenty of wins over his 12 years at the helm of both college and professional teams, critics labeled him a distant dictator unable to unite his team. To keep his job with the Giants, Coughlin changed his leadership tactics—and promptly went on to lead the Giants to a Super Bowl victory. Among his adjustments were less shouting, sharing decision-making with an eleven-player leadership council, and more effort learning about players’ personal lives. They reported feeling “inspired.”

The book of Hosea tells how an ancient leader employed love to reach his people. God commanded the prophet Hosea to marry an adulterous woman named Gomer to signify Israel’s spiritual adultery. Hosea grudgingly obeyed. One time he tracked her down at her lover’s home just to make sure she was being well cared for.
Loving Gomer against his will served a greater purpose. God wanted His people to see how He felt as the “husband” while they sought after other gods. Ultimately Hosea purchased Gomer back from the slave auction block after her last lover had had enough of her. Broken and ashamed, she accompanied Hosea back home to her children.

4. Submit to the law of enduring negativity

“Do not gloat over your brother in the day of his calamity” (Obad. 12a).

In the shortest book of the Old Testament, the prophet Obadiah warns the nation of Edom that their gloating over Israel’s troubles must stop. Their mockery of God’s chosen people is about to call down His wrath. Ironically, the fathers of each nation were brothers—Jacob, who birthed the Israelites, and Esau, who founded Edom.

This tiny book reminds us of the staying power of negativity. The international vendetta grew out of sibling rivalry, which began when Jacob deceptively stole Esau’s birthright. Jacob attempted reconciliation many years later, but Esau’s bitterness ran too deep. It lived on in his descendants, who gleefully watched their brothers suffer God’s judgment.

I’ve long observed this law of “enduring negativity”—the uncanny tendency for jealousy, bitterness, and other kinds of negative bias to exhibit unusually long shelf lives. In The Subtlety of Emotions, the author writes, “People ruminate about events inducing strong negative emotions five times as long as they do about events inducing strong positive ones.”

Negativity’s emotional power over us is immense. In The Science of Happiness, the authors write, “A melodrama will move us much more easily than a comedy. . . . If you show subjects in neuropsychological experiments happy and sad pictures, they will spontaneously respond more strongly to the latter.” Another book, Sway: The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior, corroborates: “We experience the pain associated with a loss much more vividly than we do the joy of experiencing a gain. . . . For no apparent logical reason, we overreact to perceived losses.”

Has the world conditioned us to camp out on negativity? The media certainly focuses on the negative, playing to our captivation with conflict, tragedy, and the dark side of humanity. Positive stories make good e-mail forwards, but rarely make the news. Whatever the reasons for this unbalanced dichotomy, we cannot deny the human tendency to seek and maintain negative feelings.

As leaders, we can’t force people to be positive all the time. We can inspire them and provide peaks of positive energy, but inevitably their personal fears, biases, and emotions return. Seth Godin, author of Linchpin, poses some interesting questions in an October 2008 blog post: “How long after getting a big promotion does it take for an executive to get antsy? Why do customers at a truly great 4-star restaurant often feel a little bit of a letdown after the last course is served?” It seems we get bored with the exceptional. After a peak, there is a valley. We ask, “Is that it?” Godin says people’s desire for the new and remarkable forces a leader “to realize that people
will never ever be satisfied with you, they’ll even whine when you give away something for free.”

I need to adjust to the negative tendencies of my colleagues. I must accept their own lack of trust—an aspect of human nature as inescapable as a sunrise.

5. **Lead like a humble dictator**

“And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8 NIV).

How can you have a humble heart and an iron fist? Two legendary military leaders perfected this hard/soft balance. The first is absent in most modern history books because he didn’t conquer great land masses like Alexander or Napoleon, nor did he achieve infamy by subjecting defeated peoples to ruthless treatment.

In sixth-century BC Rome, a farmer named Cincinnatus quietly tended his fields. Though widely known for his prowess on the battlefield, he resisted accepting a military command because his family would starve without him. When the Roman Senate begged him to accept a military dictatorship in order to defend the city, he finally acquiesced. Immediately after his victory over the invading tribes, Cincinnatus handed the mantle of power back to the senate and headed home. In later years they asked him to leave his modest life again to fight off a revolt, and when this second dictatorship drew to a close, he eagerly returned to his family again. He is considered one of Rome’s greatest leaders because of his selfless service, unlike most of the rulers who followed.

A couple of thousand years later, another farmer named George Washington retired from a decorated career in the French and Indian War. Weary in body and spirit, he relished the solitude and peace awaiting him at his plantation home. But when Congress came knocking years later, he reluctantly accepted supreme command of the Continental Army to defend his fledgling country from the British. After six bloody years, Washington victoriously rode home to Mount Vernon and his fields, looking forward to resuming his quiet life. But soon the country he’d fought for headed toward another disaster. Its weak government could not overcome rebellious activists and civil uprisings. Washington left retirement to help create the new Constitution, which was ratified in 1787, but he couldn’t escape the unanimous congressional vote that bestowed upon him the first presidency of the United States. After his second term, he finally returned home again, where he died three years later in 1799.

Washington and Cincinnatus shared more than similar life stories. In 1783, after the Revolution, a group of former military officers created the Society of the Cincinnati (which later inspired the name of the Ohio city). Alexander Hamilton chaired its inaugural proceedings. The Society proudly pointed to Cincinnatus as their founding father, the hero who embodied honor and duty by selflessly fighting for his country and returning to his family. Its slogan is *Omnia relinquit servare rempublicam*—“He relinquished everything to serve the Republic.” The group’s first president general was, of course, George Washington.
Two hundred years before Cincinnatus, the prophet Micah idealized this concept of humble duty and honor without concern for self. “And what does the Lord require of you?” he asked the disobedient, ungrateful Israelites. “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8 NIV). A leader who acts justly will go to battle to protect liberty, law, and life. Though he slays the enemy, he will practice mercy and humility when the fighting is over.

Sometimes the equation of justice and mercy doesn’t balance. For instance, you can act justly and hate the action because of the pain it inflicts. This internal conflict is common in great leaders. Washington struggled with exacting severe justice on his own men, though he didn’t shirk his responsibility. Cincinnatus left his family helpless at home while he dedicated himself to defending the Republic.

The concept of devotion to duty was made famous by the movie Gladiator, in which the somewhat fictional General Maximus dreams about going home to his family farm after years of war. But the dying Roman emperor begs him to assume the throne. The emperor’s only son kills his father and steals the crown. He slaughters the family of Maximus, who himself narrowly escapes but is captured half-alive and sold as a slave. In the end, Maximus succeeds in defending the honor of his family by slaying the emperor in the Coliseum, though the great gladiator himself dies from his wounds.

I can imagine the kind of emperor Maximus would’ve been—quiet, strict, deadly, merciful, and loving—just like Cincinnatus and Washington.

6. Underrate your plan

“Then the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the fish three days and three nights” (Jon. 1:17).

There are two things I hate about planning and budgeting. First, they rarely match future reality, thus most of the activity involved in perfecting them is a waste of time. You spend weeks or months envisioning, writing, debating, reworking, tweaking, and finally, executing—then, a little while later, you uncover an opportunity or threat that sends you in a new direction, rendering much of your plan useless.

Second, I’m convinced traditional budgeting and planning more often limit an organization than grow it. In many organizations, management teams haggle over line item budget numbers every month. The debate about the depressed sales of profit centers A, B, and C takes so much time, they don’t have a chance to fully dissect the reasons behind the success of D through H. Rather than flexing with the market, they stubbornly adhere to their predictions.

The Old Testament book of Jonah builds the case for creating plans that bow to the winds of the culture, not the whim of the leader. Jonah learns that forces stronger than he are in control. When his plans to go to Tarshish are dashed by the gaping mouth of a giant fish, he instead accomplishes God’s very different plan.

I’m not advocating chronic plan abandonment, but I am in favor of updating it often, and never again looking at the original plan after it’s changed. Sometimes the
operational plan needs to get tossed altogether because of drastic new circumstances. Even a solid organization needs to change.

Jonah’s lesson has been proven over and over: it is difficult to predict where we’re going. At the same time, the two extremes are equally foolish: operating without a plan, since “we can’t control anything anyway”; and enforcing a plan at all costs because “we just aren’t executing well enough.”

British writer Hannah More speaks to this philosophy of flexibility: “It is not so important to know everything as to appreciate what we learn.” We succeed when we set out with the understanding that the plan could change at a moment’s notice. Sudden market forces, health issues, personnel dilemmas, and unforeseen economic downturns often strike from the depths. A report by Deloitte points out that organizations encourage their own failure by not initiating deep, strategic change often enough. “Instead, they pursue isolated improvements within a single area or function, only to find that the changes aren’t sustainable because of their business model’s inherent limitations.” The resulting improvements lose their efficacy as the environment changes.

Since the future defies description, our plans should never be above getting dumped in the ocean. To find promising new lands, it may take an unexpected trip inside a whale.

**Conclusion**

The Bible remains the greatest leadership manual in the world. These biblical leadership techniques have worked for thousands of years, even when at times they seem counter-intuitive. But faithfully applied, these methods overflow with wisdom and protection from the lions that threaten to overtake your leadership. And the next time you find yourself in a lion’s den, may the sharpest teeth be your own.