

Chapter 1

Jesus' Leadership Secret

Big Idea: Hero makers have discovered that dying to self and living for God's kingdom through others is the secret of multiplied results and greater impact.

Want to know the secret?

I'm not trying to be clever or sly with that question. But over the last twenty-five years, I've learned that there really is a secret to multiplying great leaders. It's a secret for pastors and volunteer leaders alike. And it's what leaders in business and social sectors are looking for. You might lead a megachurch or a small group, but this secret is scalable and will allow anyone to exponentially expand his or her difference making. Not only is this leadership secret available to all of us, but if you keep reading, you can begin to apply it today.

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The Secret

Long before I ever dreamed of starting and leading a church, I dreamed of starting and playing in the National Basketball Association. That's pretty ambitious for a guy who's five foot eleven and has always had the vertical leap of a middle-aged white guy! But like I said, it was a dream.

My sons share my love of the game. They introduced me to *The Book of Basketball*,ⁱ the definitive, 719-page book on the NBA by Bill Simmons. An award-winning sports writer, Simmons is one of the few people who could write a credible bible of basketball. Chapter 1 of Simmons' book is titled "The Secret." Simmons says there is a secret about basketball that almost no one realizes. He admits that he didn't detect the secret even though he was a lifelong fan, veteran sportswriter, and viewer of thousands of professional basketball games. He didn't understand the secret until he had a conversation with Hall of Famer Isiah Thomas, best known for leading the Detroit Pistons to two NBA championships. (And Isiah is only six foot one, which gives me hope for the next NBA draft!)

In an interview, Simmons asked Thomas about the secret to winning an NBA championship. Thomas paused and smiled, hinting that there's definitely a secret to winning championships.

"The secret of basketball," Thomas finally said, "is that it's *not* about basketball."ⁱⁱ

This clearly wasn't the response Simmons expected. Seeing his confusion, Thomas shared a few stories about the incredible chemistry on his team. And that chemistry was not unique to the Pistons; it was something the Lakers and Celtics teams each had at their peak. Thomas said that he learned the secret when his team made an in-season trade of a star, high-scoring player for an aging, less-stellar performer. That player knew and understood the secret to winning. The Pistons gave up Adrian Dantley, who had a preoccupation with his own statistics, for little-known Mark Aguirre, who was a childhood buddy of Thomas. More important, though, Aguirre saw his role as doing anything he could to make the rest of the team successful. That trade didn't make sense on paper, but it led to amazing results. The Pistons turned their season around and went on to win the championship.

Thomas drove home his point. “Being the best in basketball is really all about *team*,” he told Simmons. “Everyone must put the team first.” Recalling the championship years, Thomas observed, “Lots of times, on our team, you couldn’t tell who the best player in the game was. . . . It’s the only way to win.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Most people think winning in basketball is all about having the star players who score the most points, get the most rebounds, have the highest shooting percentage, and have all the right statistics. But Thomas believes that even having all that doesn’t guarantee success. In fact, what he suggests runs counter to the prevailing wisdom. Instead of star players who are individually successful, the real secret to success in basketball is having players who are willing to sacrifice personal success for the sake of the team, even forgetting about their own stats at times.

To win, you need people who will forfeit their own success for the greater benefit of their team. That’s the secret to winning over the long haul.

“You cannot get seduced by numbers and stats,” Simmons concludes.^{iv} “It’s not about statistics and talent as much as making teammates better and putting the greatness of your team ahead of yourself. That’s really it.”^v

Jesus Knew the Secret

Jesus had a team. His team was the disciples. Jesus knew the secret and never got seduced by numbers and stats. He was explicit about his desire to equip his followers to do the heroic: “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even *greater* things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12, emphasis added). Jesus told his followers that he was investing his life in them so they would do greater things

than he would. He was setting them up so they could reach more people, go more places, and make more disciples than he ever would during his three years of earthly ministry.

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Paul Knew the Secret

The apostle Paul begins chapter 12 in his first letter to the Corinthians by, in effect, asking us a question: “Do you want to know the secret?” It’s a secret he has learned not about basketball but about the kingdom of God and how each of us has something to contribute to God’s work in his kingdom. He writes, “Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be *uninformed*” (1 Cor. 12:1, emphasis added).

Paul goes on to reveal and explain the secret in verse 12. He explains that the church has a specific design, a way in which it is intended to work. It’s a body. It’s a team. And whether we’re looking at the church locally or globally, the entire church is created by God to work together as a team, using everyone’s Spirit-empowered gifts and all other resources to build up the whole body and to accomplish our God-given mission.

The “secret” is fairly simple, right? Rather than focusing on our individual success or the success of our local church, we need to think about the greater work of God’s kingdom—all places where he is acknowledged as Lord. That whole takes priority over any individual part. You and I are part of a mission that is bigger than what either of us can accomplish by ourselves, no matter how gifted we might be. The kingdom Jesus gave his life for is far bigger than the local church you serve or the denomination or network you’re part of. As we each contribute to

God's team, it's a win for the kingdom of God as more people are added, regardless of which local congregation they land in.

The "secret" is simple: you have to think about the kingdom of God more than about yourself or even your church.

Thinking this way, as simple as it sounds, radically transforms our approach to leadership. Previously, whenever I'd read any of the hundred-plus *kingdom* references in the New Testament, my first thought would be how that applies to my own context, to Community Christian Church. Now when I read *kingdom*, I try to imagine our church *and* the churches down the road, my friend's church in downtown New York, the thirty-two-member rural church in Oklahoma, the underground church in China, and all the other global churches within God's kingdom.

This speaks to our priorities. It's what Jesus was getting at when he said, "Seek *first* his kingdom" (Matt. 6:33, emphasis added). Jesus draws our attention to the work of kingdom multiplication through parables about seeds (Mark 4:26–34) and yeast (Matt. 13:33). And there is a reason why he does this. When I begin to seek God's kingdom more than *my* kingdom, his power and purposes are revealed to us and through us.

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We cannot advance the kingdom of God or accomplish Jesus' mission if we don't apply this secret to our lives and leadership. Every true movement of the Jesus mission begins with a heart change in the leader, and that happens *as we learn to take the spotlight off ourselves*. When we

make this vital shift, we begin to shine the spotlight on others—we put the best of our efforts and energy into equipping other Christ followers and emerging leaders—empowering them to be the heroes, wherever they end up serving. Here is what lies at the heart of Jesus’ leadership. This is his secret.

In short, we must shift from *being the hero* to *becoming a hero maker*.

Table 1.1 shows the contrast.

Practice	Hero	Hero Maker
Multiplication Thinking	I <i>think</i> ministry happens through my own leadership.	I <i>think</i> ministry happens through multiplied leaders.
Permission Giving	I <i>see</i> what God can do through my own leadership.	I <i>see</i> what God can do through others, and I let them know what I see in them.
Disciple Multiplying	I <i>share</i> what I’ve learned in ways that add more followers.	I <i>share</i> what I’ve learned in ways that multiply disciples.
Gift Activating	I ask God to <i>bless</i> the use of my own gifts.	I ask God to <i>bless</i> leaders I’m sending out.
Kingdom Building	I <i>count</i> people who show up to my thing.	I <i>count</i> leaders who go out and do God’s thing.

Table 1.1: Hero versus Hero Maker

Warning: Shifting to the hero-making practices detailed in this book means that we die to self in order to live more for Christ and his kingdom. It might mean that we never get the public credit because we’ve chosen to live in a shadow rather than to seek out a spotlight.

Even though we know these decisions are the right ones because we’re advancing God’s kingdom, that doesn’t make them easy. As one of the leaders at Community Christian Church commented as we discussed being a hero maker,

You’re reminding us that real leaders first die to any vision of personal glory. The dying involves a very real transition, one of grief and loss of ever

becoming that culture-defining leader who will shape all others around us. Of ever becoming big. Of ever receiving the recognition on this side of eternity.

It's a difficult death for pastors because we all live for the dream. It goes against the grain that we may never appear on the radar but will instead spread in small units all over our city, country, and globe. We may never find the spotlight, but we will shape a whole new generation. And that's what makes it worthwhile.

In this book, I want to help you learn the secret of affirming, mentoring, and cheering other leaders into greatness and releasing them for work across God's kingdom, and the multiplication effect they create as they in turn mentor and release others. That's our role in advancing the kingdom of God.

Leaders in India Know the Secret . . . and Here Too?

I vividly remember the day I looked at my schedule and saw an appointment with a guy named Sam Stephens. I asked my assistant, Pat, why I had this meeting and who this guy was.

"I thought *you* knew him," she said. "All I know is that he is from India."

I went into the meeting wondering if this would be a waste of my time. I greeted the man, extended my hand, and asked him to tell me his story. Sam started back in the 1950s, with a story about his father. Sam's father had started a mission to plant churches in India, and by 1992 they had experienced some growth. They now had two hundred churches, and all could be traced to that first church started by Sam's dad in the '50s.

Wow, I thought. *Two hundred churches!* Sam had my attention now.

Sam wasn't comfortable talking about his own work; he's very humble. So I had to drag the details out of him. He told me that in 1992, he had taken over the mission, and he made a simple but strategic shift in the way they did things. He began to insist that every church planter not only plant a church but also have an apprentice church planter. This was someone who would come alongside the planter and learn firsthand how to plant a church, so the reproduction would continue year after year.

Now I was really curious. "How is that going?"

Without much expression, Sam replied, "Well, we now have seventy thousand churches."

At that point, I was glad that I was sitting down. I was beginning to realize that this was an incredible story. I asked Sam, "How many people does that represent?" And again his reply took my breath away.

"I think about 3.5 million," he said. Then he added, "But we are praying for one hundred thousand churches and 5 million people!"

At that, I began to wonder: how did this kind of exponential multiplication happen?

In talking further with Sam, I learned that he had discovered the secret. That simple shift he had made back in 1992 had transformed the results of their church-planting efforts. Sam had discovered that there were people and leaders all over India who had gifts, and he found that if he could empower them, encourage them, and make *them* successful, then Jesus' mission would be accomplished at a completely different level of productivity. Sam mentored leaders who in turn mentored other leaders who in turn did the same for many others. In addition to being Spirit-led and missional, what they were doing involved reproducing and multiplying through apprenticeship.

What Isiah Thomas had revealed to Bill Simmons, Sam Stephens had just shared with me.

In my office that day, Sam looked at me and said, “Dave, do you want to know the secret to what Jesus wants for planet Earth? It’s not about your personal stat line, Dave. It’s not just about growing your church. It’s about the kingdom, and by learning how to make heroes of others, look at what God can do through you!”

It’s not about your personal stat line. It’s not just about growing your church. It’s about the kingdom.

—Sam Stephens

Volunteer Leaders Know the Secret Too

Since that day, I’ve come to see firsthand that you don’t have to be a pastor, global missionary, or church leader to be a hero maker and a kingdom multiplier. Michelle Bird, the wife of my coauthor, Warren, plays in neighborhood tennis leagues. Michelle was increasingly burdened to start a small group with her friends in the tennis league to better introduce them to Jesus, so after praying about it, she invited a friend from church to be her apprentice, to help her lead the group.

“I’ll help you out, but I’m not a leader,” Michelle’s friend Hannah replied.

“I hear you, but would you be willing to talk by phone each week to pray, debrief the last meeting, and help me plan the next one?” Michelle countered.

“Sure, as long as you know I don’t want to be a leader,” Hannah said.

Every week, Michelle had Hannah do something different: greeting people at the door, leading the opening prayer, or asking the first discussion question. Hannah would agree to do it, but she would always remind Michelle, “I’m not going to be a leader.”

The women in the group loved their time together, and they asked to keep the group going and do another study. Michelle once again asked Hannah if she would be the apprentice leader. And again Hannah declined, but she said she was willing to help.

Now, two groups later, Hannah finally agreed to lead, shifting the location to her neighborhood, and to invite some of her friends as well. “I guess I can do this.” Hannah recruited her friends and led the group, now with Michelle assisting. And in the next group, Hannah led with an apprentice leader she had recruited. Michelle would join them for planning and prayer, now playing the role of supporter and coach.

Two more groups later, Hannah’s apprentice is now leading another group, and Hannah is cheering her on. Across the years as groups have met, several women have found their way back to God and are being discipled. Michelle, seeing that it’s not easy for Hannah’s apprentice to reproduce herself, is constantly asking, “How’s it going with developing your own apprentice?” The net result: the number of trained kingdom workers is being multiplied.

This is what we mean by hero making, and you don’t need a pastor or church staff in the mix to make it work.

Share the Secret

Some secrets are meant to be kept quiet. But this secret isn’t the kind you keep to yourself.

I remember one Christmas season when my kids were all younger and I took them Christmas shopping to buy gifts for my wife, Sue. After looking in several stores, they each found something for her. Our youngest, Caleb, was three years old at the time, and he had picked out a nice pair of winter gloves for his mom. As we got into the car to drive home, I said to him, “Now, Caleb, these gloves are a secret.” I probably should have explained to him what a secret

is. When we walked into the house, my wife teasingly asked the kids, “Did you get me any Christmas gifts?” Quite excited, Caleb chimed right in. “Yes, I got you gloves . . . and they are a secret!”

While I generally encourage you to keep your word and not share secrets, in this case I want you to be like Caleb. This is a secret that is meant to be shared! In fact, that’s my motive in writing this book: to share in-depth details that reveal Jesus’ leadership secrets to you, so you’ll share those secrets with others, who share the secrets, and so on.

Those who understand and live out Jesus’ secret today—people who get the link between “kingdom” and “team”—are those who play for the team name on the *front* of their basketball jersey and not for their individual name on the *back* of it. Throughout this book, I’ll keep coming back to this idea. We want to understand how Jesus worked with a handful of followers to start a kingdom movement.

My hope is that *Hero Maker* will help you redefine your success as a leader, shifting your focus from your personal accomplishments to the accomplishments of those you are raising up and multiplying. We want this book to help church leaders—and leaders in other areas as well—rethink how they measure success. We need to change the scoreboard, the way we tally the points that determine whether we are winning or losing the game. Then we will begin to see our personal success through a kingdom perspective versus seeing the kingdom through the lens of our own efforts. Our priority will shift as well, from making disciples and planting churches to making disciples who make disciples and planting churches that plant churches. *That* is what we mean by hero making!

The key to becoming a leader who multiplies great leaders is having a kingdom mindset. This means helping people identify their unique calling and then releasing them to pour into others. In

doing this, you grow as well, both personally and as a leader. You begin to exponentially increase your impact, even as you focus your efforts and attention on investing in others. You become a hero maker.

When you invest in helping as many people as possible identify their unique calling and release them to pour into others, you exponentially increase your impact.

The work of hero making can happen at any scale and in any context. Suppose your God-given capacity is to lead a small group of ten. Great! What would happen if your primary goal was not simply to be the best small group leader but to do your best to make sure someone else was an even better leader? What if that person in turn invested their gifts and energy into someone else? When we make heroes of others, the potential for eternal impact grows beyond our limited abilities and efforts.

But let's take it one step farther. Now let's imagine that this is happening in every role in the church, from the lead pastor to every staff member to every volunteer ministry leader. And what if this kingdom mindset of investing in others spilled out beyond the church to every community and business leader? You'd have a multiplication movement in the making. Hero making is the foundation of every movement because it is a *force multiplier*. It takes whatever work we do as individuals and multiplies it over and over again.

Hero making is a force multiplier.

I believe that as you read and prayerfully apply the insights and teaching in this book, drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit, and believing that Jesus wants to do “greater things”

(John 14:12) through *you*, a new normal will begin to arise in your heart and mind. You'll see how God has called and equipped you to make and multiply disciple makers of Jesus Christ for his purposes and for his kingdom. What could be more important than that?

If you want to better understand the secret of how Jesus' kingdom was designed to expand, or to gain more skill and confidence in putting his leadership secret to work, turn the page. Not only will this secret change your own leadership and your church, but it also has the potential to change the world—literally!

Hero Maker Discussion Questions

Open

- Tell about a time when you were part of a special team (sports, arts, friends, or work).
What made it special?
- What's an "aha!" moment you've had in ministry or leadership, when you discovered the secret to something?

Dig

Read John 14:12, which is about doing greater things. Prior to reading this chapter, what did you think Jesus meant when he said his followers would do greater things than he himself had done? If Jesus is our role model, and he told his followers they would do greater things, how would you apply this to your ministry and leadership?

Reflect

Judging by what you've read so far, what do you look forward to in this book? What, if anything, makes you uncomfortable?

ⁱ Bill Simmons, *The Complete Book of Basketball* (New York: Ballantine, 2009).

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 39. The following narrative is adapted from pages 38–41.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 51.

^v *Ibid.*, 54.