

TRADING TOXIC LEADERSHIP
for the WAY OF JESUS



EASY

TO

FOLLOW

FOREWORD BY
JOHN BEVERE

LYLE WELLS
with KAT ARMSTRONG

Lyle's latest work, detailing how to become a better manager by following in the footsteps of Christ, exemplifies the notion that smart people have a knack for making the complicated simple. It's not enough, however, to say that his work lives up to its title; it's also chock-full of the values that our own company abides by—it's playful, disruptive, intimate, and authentic. What more could you ask for? To become a better person? It might just help you with that, too!

Mark Sourian, president of production at 5&2 Studios (*The Chosen* series)

The leadership world is a crowded and busy space. Often you can be overwhelmed by all the noise, pitches, and gimmicks that promise big and perform small. Lyle and the team at Integrus Leadership are the opposite. They move the needle for those who have the courage and desire to grow and change. Their work has been transformational for Cornerstone Church and Hagee Ministries and for me personally. The fundamental truths and proven principles that Lyle brings to the forefront create a clear path for leaders to follow. In the complicated and complex leadership journey you face, allow Lyle to serve you. He's a thoughtful and courageous guide helping navigate the difficult route from where you are to where you are called to be. In *Easy to Follow* Lyle provides a powerful picture of what we should all strive for as leaders and followers of Christ—and a reminder that we still have work to do. Some books you read, and other books read you. The work you hold in your hand is indeed a place to study what it means to lead like Jesus.

Matthew Hagee, lead pastor of Cornerstone Church

Lyle Wells and Kat Armstrong team up to present a fresh vantage point on being a Christlike leader. In *Easy to Follow*, you'll discover the nuances that separate toxic leadership behaviors from the ways of Jesus. Self-evaluation abounds, and they leave margin for it to happen. You'll find clear distinctions in leadership practices and the mindset shifts that align you more with Jesus. Every chapter reinforces key principles through personal reflection, team discussion questions, and invitations for team feedback. They've made transferring insights from head to heart to action easy! I highly recommend this book to anyone who longs to become more like Jesus and will commit to following his lead.

Tami Heim, president and CEO of Christian Leadership Alliance

Leaders are learners. The moment you stop learning you forfeit the right to lead. One of the ways I have been privileged to learn is through a coaching relationship with Lyle Wells. My life and my leadership have been influenced beyond words. I am so thankful for *Easy to Follow*, which will allow leaders everywhere to learn from his wisdom and counsel. Lyle's biblical approach to leadership, combined with his years of experience as both a leader and a developer of leaders, will challenge you in ways you cannot imagine. I am excited about this book and the impact it will have in the lives of learning leaders everywhere!

Vance Pitman, president of Send Network and author of *The Stressless Life and Unburdened*

In a time plagued by failures of leadership in the body of Christ, *Easy to Follow* doesn't let us lose hope. It's an invitation to refocus our attention on the basics of emulating the life of Christ as we pursue health. This book is timely, insightful, and practical for leaders and laypeople alike.

Tanner Peake, president and CEO of Every Home for Christ

In *Easy to Follow*, Lyle Wells masterfully blends profound insights with practical guidance, inviting leaders on a transformative journey toward authentic leadership rooted in the teachings of Jesus. Each chapter serves as a beacon for those seeking to escape the pitfalls of toxic leadership and embrace a style that inspires, uplifts, and connects.

I have personally benefited from Lyle's extensive experience as a mentor and coach, so it is no surprise that in this text he challenges us to move beyond mere management to genuine mentorship. His compelling call to action—"Are you easy to follow?"—encourages us to reflect on our own leadership practices and their impact on our teams.

This book is not just for those in positions of authority but for anyone striving to lead with integrity and purpose. Lyle's insights will empower you to cultivate an environment where generosity and collaboration thrive. Whether you're a seasoned leader or just beginning your journey, *Easy to Follow* is an essential read that will enrich your perspective and equip you to lead with faith and authenticity.

Brandon Cormier, lead pastor of Zeal Church

In *Easy to Follow*, Lyle Wells and Kat Armstrong provide a Jesus-centered, character-based antidote to the leadership models and advice that have proven harmful to so many individuals and organizations in recent years. If you follow the guidelines in this book, you will become a better leader not merely by improving your skills but by becoming a better *person* who implements those skills.

Angie Ward, PhD, director of the doctor of ministry program and associate professor of leadership and ministry at Denver Seminary

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Easy to Follow: Trading Toxic Leadership for the Way of Jesus

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The Team: David Zimmerman, Publisher; Caitlyn Carlson, Senior Editor; Elizabeth Schroll, Copyeditor; Lacie Phillips, Production Assistant; Tim Green, Cover Designer; Cathy Miller, Interior Designer; Sarah Ocenasek, Proofreading Coordinator

Cover design by Faceout Studio

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ISBN 978-1-64158-942-0

Printed in the United States of America

31	30	29	28	27	26	25
7	6	5	4	3	2	1



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Foreword

Easy to follow. I wish this were true of all leaders. But sadly, it isn't. As someone who served in two ministries before I began to lead my own, traveling to over one thousand churches in thirty-five years and speaking to many leadership groups, I've experienced and witnessed the tragedy of following toxic leaders. The crushing burden of these chaotic environments doesn't just make the work difficult—often it causes those who are under this form of leadership to question themselves, their abilities, and even their callings.

The story of Saul and David offers us a striking contrast between toxic and healthy leadership. Saul was riddled with insecurity and sought validation through people pleasing rather than pursuing the glory of God. His thirst for recognition and control led him to view David—a loyal servant—as a threat. Saul's leadership was marked by insecurity, which led to

jealousy, fear, and self-preservation, which ultimately became his downfall.

David, on the other hand, demonstrated a different approach. Grounded in his relationship with God, David maintained a pure and faithful heart, even when surrounded by severe dysfunction. He refused to let Saul's broken leadership define him. Instead, David trusted God's timing and justice, leading with humility and reliance on God's strength. Because of this, God honored David, entrusting him with great responsibility, influence, and a legacy that continues to inspire.

Their stories challenge us to reflect on our own leadership and the environments we foster. Are we leading like Saul, driven by insecurity and self-interest, or are we striving to lead like David, rooted in holy fear and humility?

I'm grateful that my dear friend Lyle Wells has written this book. Very few leaders carry the character and competence to lead with ease that Lyle does. For several years now, he has coached me and my team, helping us create a culture where others can flourish as they answer the call to follow. Lyle has not only helped us scale as an organization but also equipped us to navigate some challenging team dynamics and situations. I have absolute confidence he'll do the same for you!

Every leader has the potential to be *easy to follow*. That doesn't mean leadership is easy; it means that great leaders create clarity, empower others, and cultivate cultures where people thrive. In this book, Lyle explores practical ways to embody the kind of leadership that reflects the heart of Jesus, the greatest leader of all time.

Jesus' simple invitation—"Follow me"—launched the most transformative movement in history. His leadership wasn't

about gaining power, control, or domination over others but about living for a cause greater than himself, one where greatness is found in serving others, making room for them to contribute and to flourish in their God-given callings and giftings.

Leadership is a sacred trust, a calling to steward the time, talents, and energy of those we serve. Whether you're leading a team of two or a movement of millions, the principles in this book will help you become a leader who is not only worth following but also easy to follow.

John Bevere
bestselling author and minister
cofounder of Messenger International and MessengerX

INTRODUCTION

HARD TO FOLLOW?

Demoralized. I never want any leader to feel that way—because I know what it's like.

I would start every day with my routines of prayer, quiet time, and exercise, thinking the entire time, *Today's the day; it's going to be different today*. But it never was.

Serving as a leader at this massive Christian organization was a grind. Years after I left, the senior leader made headlines for bullying and was ousted by the board, who said he was biblically disqualified from leadership.

During this season of leadership, I turned to grim humor to cope with the toxic work environment. I used to joke that I felt like a dog named Stay who was constantly given the

contradictory command to “come.” “Come, Stay!” If I acted deliberately and prudently, I’d be in trouble for not acting decisively or immediately. When I responded quickly or aggressively, I’d get criticized for acting too quickly or without good judgment. The resulting whiplash caused me to question two things: my ability to lead and my calling as a leader.

What’s wrong with me? I wondered. I was obviously not hitting the mark, and that was disorienting because up until this point in my life as a leader, I’d hit the mark everywhere I’d served. Doubting my ability to lead created the second nagging question: *Am I called to do this?*

From my first day on the job until the day I resigned, a week hardly went by without some sort of crisis involving the senior leader. He’d ruthlessly criticize downline leaders for failing to live up to a standard that was rarely communicated or for being generally incompetent. Shaming and condemnation—often showing up in demeaning comments like “We shouldn’t have sent a boy to do a man’s job”—were common.

Why would I choose to work in this toxic environment? Well, the organization’s mission was compelling. To this day, I’m convinced we were positioned to catalyze revival in North America. And even knowing that I’d be dealing with a leader who wasn’t easy to follow, I thought I could change things. Never could I have imagined that my role would primarily involve not mobilizing leaders and resources to spark a movement of God but reining in a loose cannon. We had a massive reach and enviable resources, but we lacked a culture where people felt valued, empowered, and fully equipped to pursue the mission of the organization.

Trust me: I’m good with hard. If I know who my enemies are

and where the challenges are coming from, I can deal with that. But when your enemies are your leaders, when the people who are supposed to provide clarity and encouragement are doing the opposite, it makes you want to throw in the towel. That's not the kind of leadership culture God wants his people to experience. God is not cruel; he doesn't throw us into confusion.

What makes a leader hard to follow isn't usually one or two big things. It's all the little things that add up—death by a thousand cuts. It's the lack of clarity, the multitude of priorities that few can define and no one can rank. It's the mixed messages that come from being told what to do and how to do it and then being chastised for doing it that way and not using your own judgment or experience. It's the feeling of constant failure that comes from the criticality of people who point out others' mistakes as a way of shielding themselves from harsh evaluation by the leader. Trade clarity for confusion, unity for self-preservation, and purpose for survival, and you will see a culture turn toxic in very short measure.

If you've experienced that kind of leadership, you know how draining and demoralizing it is. Hear me on this: Even when the mission and outcomes are noteworthy, the damage done to those who work under toxic leaders, and consequently their families, undermines all the good. A hard-to-follow leader is never worth the cost.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

I have the privilege of engaging with thousands of leaders in hundreds of faith-forward organizations. I see their passion, their zeal, their talent. What a great responsibility we carry as leaders to steward the time and talents of those we serve. How can we learn, grow, and develop into leaders who serve them

well? My answer to this question was to turn to the leader who has created the greatest movement in the history of the world, the man with billions of people who claim to be his followers, the one who started it all with two simple words: *Follow me.*



ONE

JESUS IS EASY TO FOLLOW

“Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.”

JESUS (MATTHEW 20:26, NET)

Did you know that the Bible never calls Jesus a leader?

Of course, we know that Jesus is the greatest leader who ever lived. But in the Gospels, the word *lead* is rarely used in reference to Jesus. In the descriptions of events like the visits to Caesarea Philippi and to Gethsemane, the Bible states that Jesus and the disciples “went” to these destinations. We know through context that these destinations were intentionally selected by Jesus, yet Scripture doesn’t say that Jesus led the disciples to them. When Jesus led, people willingly surrendered their lives and their livelihoods to follow him wherever he was going. Even if it came at a great cost or inconvenience.

Jesus was the kind of leader who could extend an invitation to someone to vacate their home, leave their profession, and

desert their way of life, and they would make following him their sole mission. Jesus didn't proclaim himself a leader. He traveled and talked and healed and taught, and people moved toward him.

Jesus was so compelling that his *very presence* led people.

Matthew abandoned his highly profitable tollbooth to follow him.

Mary of Bethany poured out her expensive perfume to anoint his feet.

Peter lunged toward armed Roman guards with a sword to defend him.

Jesus could motion to his disciples to move one way, and they'd jump to their feet to pursue their Savior. He didn't lead with an iron fist; he didn't bully his followers or pressure them with force. Jesus led in a countercultural way that ignited a movement that's still alive and well today. Reborn into his love, men and women were willing to follow wherever their Lord led—even after his resurrection and return to his Father's side. Christ followers were willing to surrender comfort, willing to deny privileges, willing to reject their social status, willing to give it all, even their livelihood and their lives, for the cause of Christ.

Over the centuries, even as Christ followers faced persecution, disruption, and the failures of the church, people continued to follow him. People still choose to follow Jesus every day.

So how is it that a Jewish carpenter from Bethlehem managed to ignite a spiritual revolution—a global religious movement? How did Jesus compel his disciples to follow him to the Cross? To be willing to die for the cause of Christ? What was it about Jesus that motivated the radical conversion of his

contemporaries? Why did they abandon their former way of life and embrace a new, uncharted course?

Jesus was easy to follow. That's how. That's why.

Now, I know that might sound reductionistic. Obviously, Jesus' leadership effectiveness is grounded in his deity. He is the Son of God,¹ the promised Messiah,² the King of all kings and Lord of all lords.³ But while Jesus is 100 percent God, he is also 100 percent human. Which means that as humans who bear the image of God to the world we are not just called but also *created* to lead like Jesus.

When we choose to follow Jesus, we *become* new people, and we *are becoming* new people. Which is not to say that becoming an easy-to-follow leader is easy. Following Jesus' example will be the greatest challenge of our lives. But a relationship with Jesus frees us from slavery to sin, and our outward lives begin to match our inward redemption: Our motivations change, our behaviors change, and the entirety of our being orbits around the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. As a result, we live and lead differently when we know Jesus as our Savior. Or we should, shouldn't we?

That's what this book is all about: leading like Jesus. It's about following Jesus so closely, so intently, that we practice Christlikeness with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength and become easy to follow like Jesus.

You may not think it's possible to lead like Jesus. But I want to challenge you that it's part of the very definition of becoming Christlike. As we allow Jesus to conform our hearts, souls, minds, and strength to his work and ways, as we continue to follow wherever he leads, we will find ourselves reflecting who he is not just in our personal lives but also as leaders. And as we

do, we will discover something profound: Becoming like Jesus means that we, too, become easy to follow.

AN EASY-TO-FOLLOW LEADER

When I was an emerging leader, early in my career, my passion would get the best of me; instead of helping people discover their purpose, I'd attempt to *drive* others toward our desired outcomes. I used tactics I learned from secular leadership books that focused on power, authority, and positional influence—but that involved using fear, intimidation, and threats to achieve my purposes, all in the name of serving others. I was not a leader who was easy to follow. Often, my ungodly actions were successful in achieving my objectives and the organization's goals, but good metrics are not God's only measure of good leadership.

Then I decided to use a Bible concordance to investigate what the Scriptures teach about leadership. That's when I discovered, to my shock, that *leadership* isn't a word used often in the Bible. Jesus never identified himself as a leader; he simply invited people to follow. Jesus didn't drive his disciples to surrender their lives; he simply directed them to. Jesus let his life lead his original disciples, along with countless others, to a life of purpose, provision, and promise.

Unfortunately, like me in my early leadership days, many Christians try to adapt secular leadership training to their sacred calling to lead. The problem with this method is that most leadership direction focuses solely on results—and sometimes results at any cost, or results that come with collateral damage. Sadly, we've just accepted this as the cost of doing ministry or Kingdom-focused business. But nothing could be further from

the truth. We're not supposed to shrug off the "bodies behind the bus."

You and I are called by God to be like Jesus. We're called to lead like Jesus. To be easy to follow, not hard to endure.

The real goal in our leadership should not be to look like a better leader; it should be to *be a leader who looks like Jesus*. And to do that, we have to face the mirror and examine our reflections unflinchingly. We must stare down our current leadership practices and peer past what we think our leadership should look like. We know we're becoming easy to follow when we see something a little more like Christ's reflection looking back at us when we look at ourselves.

If we don't see Christ in the mirror yet, that means we'll have to change. There's no way around it. Some of us may need to make some small pivots in the way we lead others. Others might require a 180-degree rotation—an about-face. But it will be worth it.

What made Jesus easy to follow probably wasn't that he adhered to popular leadership advice you've received in the past. You will need courage and conviction to choose the way of Jesus, especially when it goes against your favorite leadership book, your go-to leadership podcast, or a leader you look up to because of their success. When Jesus disagrees with your leadership training, it's time to abandon the wisdom of people and embrace the example of Christ.

REDEFINING LEADERSHIP

I used to believe that a leader was anyone who set a course. That's why early in my life I wanted to be a leader—because I wanted a voice, and sometimes a vote, in the course I was traveling. As a high school student, I ran for student-council offices, was a

captain on athletic teams, and even enrolled in management classes for my part-time job. I embraced a sled dog–team metaphor: If you aren’t the lead dog, then the scenery won’t change much.

Now, with decades of leadership experience under my belt, I know that that definition of leadership is incomplete at best: Not all leaders set courses. Yes, leadership from the top is crucial to organizational alignment, but just as important are the leadership behaviors of everyone else on a team. Some of the most effective leaders carry out the course that has already been set.

The Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas is one of the top tourist destinations in the world and is considered the standard when it comes to hospitality and customer service. I experienced that for myself a few years ago when I was there to facilitate a workshop. Stepping into their beautiful lobby is a delightful and overwhelming experience. The Bellagio takes up 4.2 million square feet, and I needed to find a specific conference room. I approached a bellman and asked him to point me toward the room on my itinerary. He simply said, “Follow me.” I quickly replied that he didn’t need to take me to my destination—that I was fully capable of following directions—but he insisted on taking me. As we wound our way through rows of slot machines, around crap tables, and past dozens of restaurants, he explained to me that part of their five-star service commitment is to always *take* people to a destination rather than simply *tell* them how to get there.

Leadership is not a title or a personality type. It is behavior that influences others and drives outcomes. Which means we are all leading. Whether you are the CEO of a large corporation

or a leader at a church; whether you work for a nonprofit or own your own business; whether you are a parent or a student or a teacher—you are a leader. Leadership isn't a special gift for a select few but a practice that everyone can embrace and anyone can fortify.

As I matured, I embraced this larger definition of leadership: Leadership is behavior that influences others. Influence can be positive or negative—that is, although this definition applies to leaders I admire, like Billy Graham, it also applies to those who use their influence to harm others. Some of the most destructive leaders coerce their followers into obedience. That's why leadership for a Kingdom-minded leader can't just be about influence.

So if we are all leading and all have some kind of influence—what behaviors are we exhibiting, and what results are they creating?

As a pastor, I strive to leverage my credibility, influence, and skills to help people find and follow Jesus; I want to take them from a place where they are lost, languishing, hurting, and hopeless to the peaceful and purposeful life of a Christ follower. In my role as a leader of leaders at Integrus Leadership, where we focus on behavior leadership through executive coaching and leadership training, I aim to identify and eliminate the personal and organizational constraints that leave many Christian leaders feeling both stuck and scared. In every space I lead, I'm living out this deeply held belief: If leadership is not about others, it's broken.

When I lead workshops, I frequently ask participants to name a movie that exemplifies outstanding leadership. As people start shouting out examples, I raise the stakes: There is a reward for the person who can guess my favorite leadership

movie. After about ninety seconds of chaos (and never the answer I am looking for), I shock them by revealing my all-time favorite leadership movie: *Cinderella*. Think about it—the fairy godmother, with no agenda of her own, shows up and facilitates a path for Cinderella to move from where she is to where she dreams and desires to go. What a leader!

Some leaders would tell you that there are two great days in a person's life: the day you are born and the day you discover your purpose on earth. I would add a third great day: the day you show up to help someone not just know their purpose but also pursue it.

FOLLOW ME AS I FOLLOW CHRIST

My dad died when I was six years old, but I still have vivid memories of him more than fifty years later. I loved my father. I loved him so much that I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to do everything just the way my dad did it.

When I was a toddler, I'd tag along with my dad to work as he supported other farmers in his co-op. If he had work to do, you'd better believe I was right by his side. If he needed to make a delivery, my full attention would be on watching him drop off fuel and supplies to hardworking, salt-of-the-earth men and women. If he wore sunglasses, I wanted to wear sunglasses. If he took them off, I'd take mine off. If he spit, I spit. (I guess you could say I wanted to be his spitting image.)

Being a copycat can certainly express our admiration of someone, but it can also significantly benefit us when we are emulating people worthy of that honor. In my teenage years I developed a friendship with Wendall Williams, a teammate two years older than me who embodied high character, set

lofty goals, lived with integrity, and had a zealous work ethic. Wendall was the perfect template for me in those years—a great friend who could have a lot of fun but also knew when to focus and work toward high-value goals.

When I graduated from college and began my career as an educator, I started to emulate a leader named Dominic Capra. Dominic was a leader with great presence and focus, and he loved his wife well and treated his children with tenderness. By God's grace, he mentored me and started influencing my view of leadership when I was still impressionable. His love for Christ, his commitment to his family, and the way he invested in me set me on a course I'm still on today.

You see, we're always learning our leadership practices from someone. Maybe it is a parent, a role model, a friend, or a mentor. But we are all being shaped into leaders. As such, we need to ask a key question: *Whom are we imitating in our leadership?* Is it Jesus? Or have we relegated Jesus' example to the "spiritual" parts of our ministry and Kingdom work?

My prayer for you, as you read this book, is that you will elevate Jesus as your ultimate example for leading well and then align your own leadership with the way of Christ. Whether you are on the brink of a new position of influence or a veteran leader looking to take a new step of leadership, these pages will equip you with simple resources to lead like Jesus.

In the next seven chapters, I'll guide you through seven principles that highlight Jesus' leadership practices. We'll discover that Jesus led his mission with leadership qualities that are often undervalued in our society—like clarity, mentorship, empathy, and generosity. I'll help you see how the Scriptures call attention to Jesus' method of influencing his disciples, and then I'll

offer you practical recommendations to begin practicing these principles with your team.

When I use the language of “your team” throughout this book, I’m not necessarily talking about a team who reports to you or a team you oversee (although that may be the case). Your team is the group of leaders you are part of—the context where you have influence, whether it’s part of an official role or not. What you do on a team or in an organization may change, but Jesus’ leadership posture will apply to every role you’ll ever hold.

My hope is that each chapter will be so life-changing that just the words on the page will catalyze you to action. But I



also know that most of the time when a message resonates with us, we need time for further reflection, and we need a group of other leaders to hold us accountable to make the change we’re seeking. That’s why I’ve included three or four personal reflection

questions at the end of each chapter, three team discussion questions, and three questions you can use to invite feedback into your life. You can also use this QR code to find the *Easy to Follow* guide, which includes the questions from each chapter as well as prayer prompts and journaling space.

I know this is a bold move. But I’m going to ask for your trust. I’ll ask that you follow me as I follow Christ. Not because I’ve perfected being easy to follow. Just ask my team; I’m a work in progress. But I’ve been devoted to Christlike behavioral leadership for decades. I’ve worked with thousands of catalytic leaders like you, and I know what kind of support you need to see growth in your leadership skills.

You’re going to need my vulnerability, and you’ll have it. I

won't skirt around my own failings. I'll share the lessons I've learned without leaving out the parts where I've messed up. I want you to be able to jump over hurdles that have tripped me up.

You'll need me to tell you what you need to know quickly, because you've got innumerable responsibilities. I won't mince words; I'll get straight to the point. But I'll always leave you with the next steps so you aren't just thinking about growing and changing; you'll actually change. It has been said that when you know better you do better. But I believe when you *do* better you actually do better.

And last, you'll need the Holy Spirit's power to be easy to follow. I've spent hours praying for every person who opens this book. Know this: God wants to catalyze you for Kingdom work. He's called you, so he will equip you.

We can't do this on our own. A willing spirit won't be enough. This is a *holy* endeavor, so it requires a *Holy* Spirit. The good news is that if you follow Jesus the Spirit of God is already at work in your life, and he wants to transform your leadership so that you reflect Christ to everyone you serve and to all you influence.

PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Write out your answers before you go to bed tonight.

1. Who have been the leadership models and mentors in my life? What did they teach me well? What bad habits have I learned that I need to address?
2. Who has led me and been easy to follow? What specific characteristics do I notice that contributed to a healthy leadership environment? Do I demonstrate those qualities in my leadership today?
3. Who has led me and been hard to follow? What specific characteristics do I notice that contributed to a toxic leadership environment? Do I display any of those traits in my leadership now?

TEAM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Ask these questions during your next team meeting.

1. When have you felt well led? What did that look like?
2. Give a couple of examples of leaders, besides Jesus, whom you would describe as easy to follow.
3. If you had been one of Jesus' original disciples, which aspect of his leadership do you think would have been most encouraging to you?

INVITATIONAL QUESTIONS FOR FEEDBACK

Using one of these questions, ask at least one person you lead for feedback in the next seven days.

1. Do you feel heard and seen by me in my leadership role?
2. Are my communication rhythms and check-ins serving you well?
3. What are your short-term and long-term goals for your current role?