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# 10 Leadership Lessons



**EAGLE BROOK**  
CHURCH



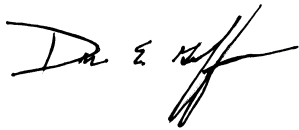
## Introduction

In 2004 I was having lunch with Dale Peterson at Panino's on Hwy 96 in Shoreview. I thought the topic of the day was to discuss the small group that I had been leading and the future plans for such a group. Dale had something different in mind. Mid-way through the lunch, Dale slid a piece of paper across the table that had a job description. Our conversation changed from leading a small group, to leading a team of pastors at Eagle Brook. For almost 16 years, I've had the honor of working at Eagle Brook, where I've watched a church grow from 3,000 weekend attendance to over 25,000. What a ride it's been!

I'm grateful to have had a front-row seat to Bob's leadership and teaching. I've tried hard to soak in the days by strategically trying to dissect the way that he leads and teaches so that I could apply some of what Bob has to offer to my leadership.

When I heard that Bob was retiring back in the spring of 2019, I fought back the tears and worked on managing the emotion of saying good-bye to a world-class leader and friend. Bob and I have been on many trips together; we've been in 100's, if not 1000's of meetings together. We have shared some of life's highest moments and some challenging moments on personal and professional levels. I've been on the leadership team and off the leadership team throughout my career, but Bob and I have connected personally about once a week during my entire 15 years here. Part of my internal processing has been to reflect strategically about the way that Bob has led our church to where it is today. During my time of reflection, I wrote down ten leadership lessons that I learned from Bob and would like to apply to my leadership.

These lessons are directed at me. I need to grow in all of these areas, and I believe writing them down will help me to apply them more directly to my leadership. I hope my observations of Bob Merritt will help you lead at a higher level, too.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don Graffam". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent flourish at the end.

Don Graffam  
Exec. Director of Campus Ministry

## Be a Lint-Picking Leader

I came on staff in the fall of 2004. I was excited to show up for my first weekend on the job and see how this church really works. What's it like to see behind the curtain? How do the staff and volunteers get ready for the 3,000 or so people that would soon be arriving? How would Bob get prepared for the mass of people that would soon be flooding into the auditorium?

I came to church at 7 am on a Sunday, excited about my new role and to learn about what a well-oiled machine Eagle Brook was like. When I got to the campus, my first duty as a pastor was to walk up and down every row of chairs and look for garbage.

Garbage duty? That's why we're here early?

As I looked around, Bob was already at work, walking up and down every row. What was he doing? Straightening chairs, bending over and picking up garbage. At the same time, the playback from Saturday night would be on the screens. The band members would be in the back of the room sipping their Starbucks while Bob and the pastors would walk row by row picking up old programs, creamer packets, nail clippings, and lint. We'd often gather at the back of the room and share the nastiest things we'd find after our scavenger hunt.

There was always a part of me that wondered, don't we have other people that do this? Didn't we hire people to do this?

But throughout my years, there are many times I've watched Bob grab a shovel and clear a sidewalk. I've seen him sweep the entry and wipe off countertops. One time I was talking to Bob outside the Centerville location. When we were in mid-conversation, I noticed Bob bend over and grab weeds out of the landscaping. Before we were done, I watched him climb through our bushes, and grab all sorts of weeds and grass that were sticking out of the rocks. I'm not sure he heard what I said, but the front entry looked great.

Here's the leadership lesson – Pay attention to details. Weeds and lint are just symbolic of how Bob looks at a weekend service and ministry. He is hyper-focused on what people say and do, what's on the screens, the transitions, volume, and every word spoken on the weekend. All because the experience is too great to compromise on a detail that could've been taken care of ahead of time. Be a lint-picking leader.

Leadership Lesson – Leaders are obsessive about the details.

### Bring Your Leftovers To The Airport

Many years ago, the leadership team went on a trip to Atlanta to discover what another church was doing to reach more people for Christ. On the trip, we decided to stop for Chinese food one night. As is typical of Bob, he didn't finish his meal, asked for a leftover box, and took a portion of his meal with him when he left. It's always a little strange to me that Bob never finishes his meal but still has an interest in sampling other people's meals. It's not uncommon to be at lunch with Bob and to hear the question, "You gonna eat all those fries?" "Were you going to eat that pickle?" or "Do you mind if I try that?" No wonder he can never finish his own meal.

Anyway, on this trip to Atlanta, Bob brought his leftovers back to the hotel. The hotel didn't provide refrigerators because those hotels would be too swanky for our blood. Bob decided to hang his meal off the outdoor rear-view mirror of the van that we rented. He figured that the cool evening Atlanta air would keep his meal at a safe temperature overnight. The next day, Bob brought his leftovers to the airport so that he could have them while we waited for our mid-afternoon flight. In those days, security was at a peak at all airports. You couldn't bring shampoo or toothpaste through security, but somehow, Bob managed to get his Chinese food through all security protocols. After we got through the TSA lines, most of us peeled off and went to a restaurant to get a typical meal, but not Bob. Bob went from one airport employee to another, asking them if they would be willing to warm up his leftovers in a microwave somewhere. After asking numerous employees, he finally found someone who knew where a staff lounge was and willingly warmed up Bob's leftovers so that he could enjoy day old Chinese food as he waited in an airport lobby.

I have multiple stories about the efforts that Bob would go through to save a dollar. Here's the leadership point. Leaders say no to what others would say yes to. Bob would never bask in the privileges that he could've enjoyed with the success that he had earned along the way. Bob would regularly decline opportunities that would have any pretentious appearance to them. In a day and age where megachurch pastors are scoffed at due to their expensive choices, Bob's relentless protection for the reputation of the church was so intentional that he was willing to forsake some of the conveniences he could've enjoyed along the way, like choosing leftovers in an airport.

Leadership Lesson – Leaders say no to what others would say yes to.

### Read This Not That

Back in 2006, I was scratching and clawing to finish off my seminary degree. It was tough work for me because I had two small kids at home, I was trying to keep up at Eagle Brook, and school does not come naturally for me. Getting my seminary degree was a battle for me every day I had to open a book.

During this period of time, Bob invited me on a trip. While we were in an airport waiting for our flight, I pulled out one of my massive textbooks for seminary. It was a book focused on Soteriology, the study of salvation. Shortly after I wrenched open this heavy book on my lap, Bob dropped into the seat right next to me and said, "Whatcha reading?" With a little bit of pride, I told the senior pastor of our church how hard I was working to get my seminary degree and how I was diving into this deep topic about better understanding on who Jesus was, as our Lord and Savior, through this book on Soteriology. Bob's eyes got wide, and he reached into his little backpack that he had with him. He pulled out a book and said, "This book is way more meaningful than that book. You should read this, not that." He handed me a book called "Marley and Me." Then, he walked away to wander the concourse again.

If you don't know, it's about a dog and its owner.

Bob's never been impressed by big seminary words or theological details that very few people in the world are chewing on. Bob was always laser-focused on relating to the Average Joe. There have been many times that a group of us would get excited about a spiritual nuance or theological teaching that had a profound nature to it when Bob would jump in and declare, "Average Joe doesn't care about that. Average Joe cares about his marriage, his kids, and about how to make it through Monday. If it doesn't relate to Average Joe, let's forget it." The most common compliment I hear about Bob's teaching is this exact phrase. "It's like he was speaking right to me." Good leaders read books like Marley and Me, AND books about soteriology so that they can best relate to the people who are far from God and in need of a Savior. Keep reading and learning, but don't let your scholarly efforts create a divide between you and the person trying to figure out who God is.

Leadership Lesson – Leaders speak the language of Average Joe.

### Leave the Organ Where It Is

When you look at today's multi-site, large-church landscape, you think of people like Andy Stanley, Craig Groeschel, Rick Warren, and Steven Furtick. All of them have large churches, but there's one significant thing that Bob has accomplished that separates him from almost every other megachurch pastor. He took a church of 300 and turned it into a church of 25,000. All of these other leaders had the luxury of building their own culture, leadership principles, visions, and strategies. Bob had to come in and take someone else's culture, principles, and strategies and turn them into a renewed approach to reaching those that were far from Christ. This is a task that very few leaders can do, but all would want to do. Bob has effectively turned something that was going one direction and now goes a different direction.

When Bob first came on staff, he made it clear from the beginning that he was here to reach people for Christ. If the church board wasn't in alignment with that, they should hire someone else. Shortly after Bob came on staff, it became apparent that not everyone was as excited about reaching people for Christ as he was. Within weeks, the small staff he had was leaving, and attenders weren't on his side. During these days, all Bob had to work with was a choir, an organ, and an overhead projector at the White Bear Lake campus. Although Bob could see some of the necessary changes, he discovered this wasn't going to be easy. One of the changes he wanted to make was to upgrade the music, but the organ was a centerpiece at First Baptist of White Bear Lake. Bob knew the organ had to go, but he knew that it would be a massive change. Eventually, the Worship Pastor would lead from other instruments, but the organ stayed on stage. It wasn't time to move it yet. Then the day came when the organist passed away, and even after the organist had died, he knew the congregation still wasn't ready. He understood that it would be a significant change, and the timing of the change is a critical part of leadership. Eventually, the organ went away, but removing organs can make and break leaders.

Throughout the years, there have been many times Bob has pulled back the reins on the building of new sites.

There have been many times where the whole room was saying, "let's go," but Bob has frequently been the one to say, "Leave the organ where it is—we're not ready yet." Throughout the years, Bob has managed the spigot of change in a masterful way. There are many stories where people were ready to take the next step, yet Bob would step forward and courageously say, "I know you're excited about taking this next step, but I think we need to wait." This internal discernment about the rate of change has set Eagle Brook up to take the slow, steady, and significant path that it has.

Leadership Lesson – Leaders manage change with great caution.

### Make it Shorter

During my nine years as a Campus Pastor at White Bear Lake, it was common that when Bob would take a weekend off at Lino Lakes, he would attend the WBL location. He'd usually attend the 4 pm on Saturday. Immediately after the service, Bob would be waiting for me someplace in the auditorium with a program filled with different notes and comments on the service and my leadership. With a bit of intimidation, I would ask Bob the question, "How did it go?" and he would always have a few comments. Bob would never miss the opportunity to provide feedback and coaching. However, throughout the vast majority of the time that we experienced that moment together, Bob told me the same two things almost every time. First, that was really good. Then he'd often have something specific he'd appreciate about my time on stage. I remember one particular time when I talked about my forgetfulness as a leader, and I told the story about how I got pulled over for a speeding ticket. He specifically commented on how he appreciated the way I told the story and how I tied to the theme of forgetfulness. He said, "most people wouldn't have been able to connect that theme in the way you did." His second piece of advice was almost always, "If there's one thing to change, I'd make it shorter." Then sometimes, he'd add, "I'm not sure what you should cut because it was all good, but you should chop something."

This is a mantra for Bob and his leadership. "Make it shorter." This applies to almost every communication. Messages, campus pastor spots, prayers, emails, you name it. In Bob's perspective, the best communication is prepared, prayed for, and brief. No need to repeat or pound on a certain point. Bob's leadership principle is to "make it shorter." Many pastors find the need to do the opposite, and pastors can be known for being long-winded or verbose. Not Bob. He's always been able to teach and communicate in a concise way that never feels shallow or lacking. This is one of the attributes that Bob has mastered and makes him a unique leader. In light of this lesson, I'll keep this teaching shorter than the others.

Leadership Lesson – Leaders communicate with brevity and clarity.



### We're the Last of the Mohicans

One day, Bob and I were standing by the coffee maker, talking about a couple that he was going to be meeting. He spoke about how they were living together, had no faith to be spoken of, and how their parents never led the way for them. He talked about how this couple wants to do the right things but has no idea how to build a Godly marriage. With a cup of coffee in hand, Bob went on a bit of rant about how broken our world is, how parents aren't leading the way, and media and other sources of input are failing to teach us a moral life. He started talking louder and more passionately about how our world is dark and getting darker. He was building in intensity about how someone needs to stand for what is right and true. How else is a young couple going to change the message that they've been bombarded with their whole lives? Who is going to change the cultural trends of immorality, sexual promiscuity, and a life of vanity? Then he looked right at me, and he said, "It's YOU! And it's ME! It's our church. We are the last of the Mohicans. If we don't do it, no one else will. If we don't stand for what is right and true, it's lights out!"

Hebrews 10 says to "Hold unswervingly to the faith we profess." This is our call. Hold unswervingly to the message of hope in which we carry. Christ-centered people are the Last of the Mohicans. The future of our world is headed in a dark direction if Christ-centered people and Bible-teaching churches don't step up and find relevant ways to reach the lost. We must carry with us a sense of urgency and responsibility that, without the message of Christ, our world will only get darker. Don't look around for other people to solve this issue. Businesses are not going to do it. Schools can't do it. Sports, clubs, and theatre are not going to do it. Families are rarely doing it, and the media is not going to do it. It's YOU! It's ME! We are the last of the Mohicans—stand firm for what you believe in because you carry the greatest mission on the planet.

Leadership Lesson – Leaders stand for what is right, even when it's costly

## Look for Gold

For many years, Bob would show up in a conference room at 1 pm on Mondays, and he'd bring a pile of papers that he had been working on all day. It was the message for the upcoming weekend. He would invite 5-7 of us in the room to listen to him read it. As he read his message out loud, we'd regularly stop and talk about how we could make something better, how we could tighten up a transition, or if there would be a creative visual or video that could complement the message. After Bob would read a portion of his message, the team would chime in, and Bob would voraciously take notes on a legal pad of paper. It was always intimidating when I would say something, and Bob would write it down. I often wondered if I had anything significant to contribute, but Bob would faithfully take notes on what the team talked about every time. Sometimes you could see him feverishly writing, then he'd say "that's gold!" and you would later hear that thought or phrase on the weekend message. Often, he'd write it all down; then, he'd look up and say, "did you come up with that all by yourself?" Every once in a while, Bob would give his ideas, and he'd say, "I'm giving you gold here." That usually meant we were supposed to use it somewhere.

Bob has always valued the use of teamwork and humility. He has never gotten too big to listen or learn from others. He's a regular note-taker in any meeting, and he is on a relentless quest to learn and grow.

When you have a team of people that can be ruthlessly honest with you and when you can be humble enough to listen, take notes and implement what your team is teaching you—you'll get better. Invite others to give you feedback. Take notes at every meeting and look for ways you can encourage, strengthen, and make each other better.

Leadership Lesson – Always be humble enough to take notes and learn from others.

## Everyone Needs a Vasectomy

It isn't a big secret that Bob has had some difficult seasons where he wasn't relationally hitting on all cylinders. There are stories about Bob's leadership where staff members felt diminished, attendees were cut off, and people feared when Bob walked into a room. To help Bob through this, he was given the assignment to meet with a leadership coach. This coach would send a survey to dozens of Bob's closest friends, colleagues, and family members asking some tough questions about what Bob was like at his best, and what he was like at his worst. To receive this, Bob had to go on a multi-day retreat where the coach would read him every word of what people candidly thought about him. He heard multiple comments about his anger, his short fuse, and the fear that people had around him and his leadership. The massive book of feedback was a turning point for Bob and his leadership.

When Bob returned to Eagle Brook from his time away with the leadership coach, I was in a conference room with him where we got to ask him how things went. He sat back in his chair a little dazed and confused, and he said, "Have you ever gotten a vasectomy?" He said, "That's pretty much what it was like. You are in a very compromising position; a doctor is looking at everything that is most private to you, and then you start to have an extremely delicate surgery that you don't want to have."

Most leaders refuse to get the feedback they need to get a full understanding of what other people think of their leadership. The vast majority of influential leaders know that they have a dark side to their leadership, but most leaders severely underestimate their dark spots. Sometimes you need a person or a team of people to tell you that it's a bigger deal than you think. Sometimes you need a leadership vasectomy. Asking for candid feedback, refusing to downplay your weaknesses as a leader, and making some drastic changes to work on you're you're told can take your leadership to a new level. Don't underestimate the need for candid feedback as a leader.

Leadership Lesson - Every leader needs candid feedback.

There are 50K People Within a Golf Shot of this Church, and We're Going to Reach Em.

If there's been one quote that has carried with Bob throughout his career, it's this one. Early in Bob's career, there was a membership meeting, where Bob was casting vision for what he would want to accomplish as senior pastor. With a prophetic declaration, Bob said, "There are 50,000 people within a golf shot of this church, and were going to reach em for Christ." This quote went into the minutes and has been repeated dozens, or maybe 100's of times as a rallying cry for Eagle Brook while it has been under his leadership.

This is a way of thinking for Bob. It's a leadership mindset that has driven him to think of any way possible to reach lost people for Christ. At the heart of Bob's leadership is a deep love for people and a firmly held conviction that our world is a dark place. He believes to his toes, that time is short, and we must do everything in our power to reach others. Bob's heart aligns with passages like Matthew 28 that commission us to "Go and make disciples of all nations" or Acts 1:8 "To be witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth." Bob carries a burden for broken marriages, disengaged parents, and wayward children. His life and career have been devoted to helping, guiding, and bringing these people the greatest message on the planet.

If there's ONE clear mission for Bob and his life, it's that he has spent his life empowered by God to reach others for Christ. It's Bob's mission; it's at the very core of our church and what we believe God has called us to do. Deep in Bob is the strongly held burden to love as many people as possible into a relationship with Jesus Christ. The reason why Bob has faced the battles he has, and why he has leaned into his leadership growth and endured the life of sacrificial leadership—is all hinged on his love for people and the desire for them to enter into a life-saving relationship with Jesus. It epitomizes who Bob is and the leadership that he has demonstrated all the way through.

Leadership Lesson – Do whatever it takes to reach the lost for Christ.

### It All Starts on the Orange Carpet

Many years ago, there was a small group of pastors that would start the weekend huddled up in a tiny room off the upper White Bear Lake lobby for a time of connection and prayer. The room is now more appropriately used as a closet, but back in the day, it was this tiny room with orange shag carpet, outdated chairs, no artwork, and quite simply, a basic room that a bunch of us crammed into every weekend.

On a memorable Easter morning, we had our regular time of connection and prayer. After our prayer time was over, we all got up to leave the room, and Bob said he was going to stay back for a bit. As I left the room, I was stopped by the producer, who was a bit frantic. She said, "Do you know where Bob is? We need him ASAP for a soundcheck." I said, "Yup, let me go get him, turned around, and went back to the prayer closet." When I got to the room, I opened up the door, and there was Bob. All alone. On his knees, he was hunched over a chair, with his back to the door. I quietly, but quickly closed the door, went back to the producer and said, "He'll be here in a few minutes."

That visual has always stuck with me. Our leader, starting his day, on his knees, alone, petitioning the heavens to speak through him as he teaches and leads our church.

If you want to know the power of Bob's leadership, it's from heaven above. It's not his. He's been clear about his ongoing battle with the overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. This has never held him back, but it's forced him to his knees.

Zechariah 4:6 says, "Not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit says the Lord." Bob has always recognized that any success didn't come from him but from the Spirit. He has consistently recognized that his strength came from a source higher than himself. Bob has always displayed a humble yet transparent need from God to teach and lead our church. All leaders should do the same.

Leadership Lesson – Great leaders start on their knees.