

Foreword by HENRY CLOUD, PhD

# leadership axioms.

POWERFUL LEADERSHIP PROVERBS

# Bill Hybels

*Previously published as AXIOM*



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The names of some of the people mentioned in this book have been changed to protect their identities.

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**F o r t h e l a s t t w e n t y y e a r s ,**  
I have had the extraordinary privilege to work alongside two of the most capable leaders in the kingdom: one, a Stanford grad from Texas who wears boots to operas, prepares gourmet meals, and demonstrates to his sons how to sack opposing quarterbacks in the park district football league. The other, a Harvard grad who coaches a girls' pole-vaulting team on the side and can still high jump his own height at forty-five years of age.

Greg Hawkins and Jim Mellado make coming to work every day pure delight for me. Godly, smart, humble, team-oriented—the list could go on. Colaboring with them has been a gift beyond what they ever could understand.

This one's for you, guys!

## 16 Six-by-Six Execution

I was sitting in an airplane one time coming back from an international trip, and the closer we got to Chicago, the more my mind swirled with the long list of to-dos awaiting my return. I took out my calendar and counted six weeks left until year-end. Only six weeks' time to tackle what seemed like a *hundred* critical challenges.

I grabbed a pen, took out an index card, and wrote one question at the top: "What is the greatest contribution I can make to Willow Creek Community Church in the next six weeks?" I wanted to know which decisions and initiatives only I could accomplish, which services we needed to hit out of the park, which staff issues I absolutely had to address, and so forth. It took me the better part of the remaining two hours of that trip to sort it all out, but the net result of that exercise was a list of six items that, if achieved, would have me singing the Hallelujah Chorus come December thirty-first.

The next morning, I placed that index card front and center on my desk. My list included things such as finishing my message for the Christmas Eve services, meeting a fairly large fund-raising challenge for one of our ministries, and hiring a key staff person. And by God's grace, over the next six weeks I got every one of those initiatives done. Candidly, I don't know that I have ever made a more significant contribution to Willow than I did those six weeks. But then again, I'm not sure I had ever been quite so focused in my attempts.

January rolled around, and I decided to do it once more. "Okay," I thought, "what are the six most important challenges I can focus on between now and the fifteenth of February?" I had another international trip coming up then and figured I'd feel like a war hero if I could go two-for-two on this newfound practice.

It took several hours of reflection to surface the top priorities, but once I did, I attacked them ferociously. In addition to dramatic increases in my satisfaction level because of all the work I was getting accomplished, I noticed



my prayer life headed northward as well. I was crystal clear on what I was supposed to be doing for that six-week period of time, and I found myself shamelessly imploring God to show up and do mighty work on my behalf. Amazingly, he did just that.

In addition to orchestrating near-daily miracles around Willow pertaining to my top priorities, he also gave me a massive dose of peace regarding the *intentional neglect* of things that weren't on my beloved six-by-six list. It was during that season I learned that deliberate disregard can be every bit as important as conscious concentration.

I operated on my six-by-six plan for that entire calendar year and was so impressed by what my focused efforts yielded that at the next management retreat, I took two hours explaining the tool to my senior leaders. I allotted yet another two full hours for them to work through the exercise and net out their top six priorities. "There is nothing sacred about the six weeks," I explained. "But this past year, that particular amount of time seemed to keep my urgency level high. I can't sprint for six months, but six weeks? That, I can do."

There was also nothing sacred about having exactly six items on the list. Most leaders don't have the luxury of having only one ball to carry, but they know trying to juggle sixteen is an impossible feat.

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*That, I can do."*

My teammates agreed that six seemed a reasonable compromise and were thrilled to finally have a streamlined set of goals to operate against. For twelve months straight, they did exactly that, emailing me their priorities one six-week chunk at a time.

The following summer, we upped the ante at the management team retreat. I said, "You've all done a fantastic job operating by the six-by-six tool, but I think it's time your peers see your cards, instead of just me."

All members of the management team — myself included — posted their most current six-by-six list on a flip chart and then, one at a time, walked their colleagues through the rationale behind their priorities. The drama that unfolded over the next two hours could have been a reality TV show. "That's not urgent!" someone would shout as he saw one of his peer's priorities. Or "Hang on a minute! You're focusing all your



attention on *those* things?” another would ask, to the complete shock of the person who had written them down in the first place.

It was obvious there were varying opinions about what things qualified as the church’s most pressing matters. The stunned person would say something like, “Well, surely you want me to focus on this!” and hear in reply, “No, no, no! Don’t bother with that! Here, what if you focused on this instead. . . .”

We doled out revised task lists faster than a Vegas card dealer, and once the entire team saw the fruit of their collective labor, they sat back and said, “Now our next six weeks are going to be a ball!”

What’s more, everyone was exposed to the sheer weight some of our team members were carrying. “Please know you’re not in this alone,” someone would say to a colleague whose list looked a bit intimidating. “The rest of us are going to be praying for you over this six-week period. If the load gets too heavy, let us know.”

Staff leaders would see my list and say, “Bill, we had no idea you were pouring energy into all of that! How can we help? How can we pray for *you*?”

A really simple idea that had evolved into an effective management tool was now an informative, instructive, and corrective means of fostering a genuine sense of *team* among our senior leaders. Pretty cool.

We still operate this way today.


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