

MANAGEMENT BY PROVERBS

Scriptural Wisdom for Superior Results

MICHAEL ZIGARELLI

9 to 5
MEDIA

CONTENTS

Introduction: Why Manage by Proverbs?	3
The Manager in the Mirror	
PRINCIPLE 1: Commit Your Work to God	21
PRINCIPLE 2: Lead with Humility	29
PRINCIPLE 3: Lead with Integrity	37
PRINCIPLE 4: Avoid Cultural Conformity	45
CASE: What Really Matters at Work?	57
CASE: Peter at Polydeck	59
VIDEO CASES: Flywheel, Wall Street, The Letters, The Blind Side	65
Managing Your Organization	
PRINCIPLE 5: Consider Profit a Means, Not an End	71
PRINCIPLE 6: Be Guided by Core Values	79
PRINCIPLE 7: Plan with Many Advisers	85
PRINCIPLE 8: Simplify the Structure	97
PRINCIPLE 9: Execute with Excellence	105
PRINCIPLE 10: Improve through Analytics	113
PRINCIPLE 11: Provide for the Poor	119
CASE: The Downsizing Dilemma	129
CASE: Big Problems at Big Idea	131
VIDEO CASES: Moneyball, Jobs, Jerry Maguire, The Founder	137
Managing Your People	
PRINCIPLE 12: Perfect Your People Skills	145
PRINCIPLE 13: Measure Twice, Hire Once	157
PRINCIPLE 14: Build Organizational Trust	167
PRINCIPLE 15: Value Employee Input	177
PRINCIPLE 16: Motivate through Praise	187
PRINCIPLE 17: Deliver Criticism with Care	195
PRINCIPLE 18: Terminate Troublemakers	205
CASE: When a Good Worker is Poor	215
CASE: Praising People to Success at Mary Kay	219
VIDEO CASES: Freedom Writers, Miracle, Apollo 13, Dead Poets Society	225

Managing Your Life

PRINCIPLE 19: Train, Don't Try, to Become a Better Person	231
PRINCIPLE 20: Pursue Excellence in Everything	235
PRINCIPLE 21: Clarify Your Calling	241
PRINCIPLE 22: Rejoice in the Spouse of Your Youth	245
PRINCIPLE 23: Guide Your Kids to Walk with the Wise	249
PRINCIPLE 24: Invest Your Money Faithfully	253
PRINCIPLE 25: Don't Be a Slave to Your Feelings	257
PRINCIPLE 26: Close the Gratitude Gap	261
PRINCIPLE 27: Tame Your Temptation	265
PRINCIPLE 28: Get Rid of Gossip	269
PRINCIPLE 29: Ten Commandments for Difficult Conversations	273
PRINCIPLE 30: Keep Listening to Instruction	279
CASE: Successful Sam	283
CASE: Creating a Career Plan	289
VIDEO CASES: Chariots of Fire, The Pursuit of Happyness, Amazing Grace, Fireproof	293
Notes	297
Index of Proverbs Used in this Book	313

Principle 12

PERFECT YOUR PEOPLE SKILLS

Years ago, I conducted a quality of work life study for a Christian ministry, a study that included confidential interviews with employees about their bosses. Although most employees had glowing things to say, the feedback from the lowest performing department in the organization told a consistently different story. Here's a representative sample of this department's comments about their boss, Tim (not his real name):

- "There's an old saying: 'People join companies and leave managers.' If you doubt that, just look at this group over the past 10 years. We've lost some great people for no other reason than their interpersonal problems with Tim."
- "Technically, Tim's great, but he's just not very good with people. He seldom communicates with us, we only see him when he needs us to do something, he's stingy with thanks and encouragement, and he manages by fear and intimidation. Then he wonders why people don't want to follow him, why they're not committed to his vision or his initiatives. I'd tell him why, but he doesn't listen to us, so what's the use?"
- "We're a scattered flock and the more the shepherd whacks us with his staff, the more scattered we get. I used to go the extra mile for Tim, but honestly, I'm finding it harder and harder to do that."

- “God gave Tim a lot of talented people to manage, but he doesn’t relate well to us, he doesn’t trust us, and he’s suffocating us with micromanagement. That’s why many of the best and brightest have left over the years. It seems that, just like in the gospel story, God’s taking away Tim’s ‘talent.’”
- “Personally, I kind of like the guy, but his gifts don’t fit his job. He’s an analyst by training. He’s great with research and numbers, but he’s weak on leading people. Deep down, he might care about his employees, but his mannerisms imply just the opposite.”

When I interviewed Tim, it seemed he hadn’t a clue why his department was achieving only mediocre results. His people had the necessary skills and they were in jobs that matched those skills. Sure, the pay was below market, like in most ministries, but that was the case with the high-performing departments in their ministry as well, so money wasn’t the problem.

In a moment of unhappy reflection, Tim confided to me: “When they were grooming me for this spot, I went back to school to get an MBA. I spent four years there taking classes at night. But they never really taught me how to get people to do what you want them to do.” Soon after that, Tim cut short our interview to get back to his spreadsheet.

The Power of People Skills

Here’s a newspaper item that might surprise you—and Tim. It’s a conclusion from a *Wall Street Journal* survey of more than 2,000 corporate recruiters: “Interpersonal communication and other so-called soft skills are what corporate recruiters crave most, but find most elusive in MBA programs.”¹

Did you get that? Communication skills. Interpersonal skills. People skills. That’s what recruiters are looking for more than anything else when filling management slots. Yes, they want the “hard” skills, too: They want you to know strategy and economics, how to analyze the financials and statistical data and so on.

But the soft skills are currently king of the skill hill. Perhaps they should have been all along.

Some further evidence: Listen to the recruits as well as the recruiters. A survey of 1,500 graduates from 18 full-time MBA programs, conducted by the leading business school accrediting body, found that graduates rated “one-on-one communication” as the most important workplace skill. However, only *six percent* of these alums considered their business school any better than “moderately effective” at helping them develop in that area.

Interesting findings, aren’t they? People who can get things done through others—those who can persuade, those who can inspire, those who are liked and who get along well with others—stand the best chance of becoming effective leaders in the workplace (and seemingly the best chance at getting the jobs in the first place).

Interesting, but hardly path-breaking. We’ve known this for decades. Just look at *How to Win Friends and Influence People*,² the perennial bestseller. It made the same argument as far back as 1936.

And thousands of years before that, the Judeo-Christian scriptures taught much the same thing: the value of people skills. Whether you want to motivate employees, sell your product, raise capital, negotiate favorable terms, elevate your culture—or simply if you want to reflect God’s love in all your interactions—the Book of Proverbs indicates that perfecting your people skills may be pivotal to success.

Proverbs on People Skills

Proverbs teaches a truth that’s so obvious we seldom think about it: How we relate to people directly affects our ability to influence or persuade them. But it goes deeper, too, reminding us that our external people skills flow from an internal source.

Consider this tandem of verses, as translated in the New American Standard version:

*The wise in heart will be called understanding,
and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness*

Proverbs 16:21

*The heart of the wise instructs the mouth,
and adds persuasiveness to his lips*

Proverbs 16:23

These proverbs imply at least two connections worth remembering. First, there's *a connection between the heart and the mouth*. Jesus' familiar words "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34) echo the very scriptures Jesus read: "the heart of the wise instructs the mouth" (Proverbs 16:23). What's in our heart will ultimately migrate to our mouths, for better or for worse.

Second, there's *a connection between our mouth and our influence*. Our words are a primary vehicle for persuasion, as we all know. How we speak to people—the content of our speech, the tone we use, the inflections of our voice, the emotion in our words—will often determine the extent to which we will influence others. "Sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness," declares Proverbs 16:21.

Putting it together, then, the sequence is heart, mouth, influence. It's a cause-and-effect relationship that differs in one critical respect from contemporary counsel about perfecting our people skills: *It all begins with the heart*.

That's an essential reminder. If you want to be persuasive and winsome with people, don't start by looking for the magic words or by mastering the tactics. People skills, Proverbs says, begin with a heart that's right with God and right with the person in front of you. Without that, those skills may be nothing more than manipulation.

Twenty Time-Tested Techniques

So, given that caveat of having a godly disposition, let's look at some people skills—the how-to's of interpersonal relations.

One last prefatory note, though: What's said below has been said before. These people skills techniques have been handed down throughout the ages, published in many forms by many authors. And that's because they're timeless. They improve relationships, they improve organizations, they improve families, and they improve our lives, regardless of when or where we live.

Also, this list of 20 techniques is not exhaustive; you could no doubt add to it. But it may be a helpful primer for how you can perfect your own people skills.

1. *Don't complain.* It's been said, and rightly so, that you shouldn't bother complaining. Eighty percent of the people won't care and the other twenty percent think you deserve what you're getting. But if you prefer the Bible to bumper stickers, consider the Apostle Paul's admonition: "Do everything without complaining or arguing" (Philippians 2:14).

Tip One is stop complaining. It seldom gets you anywhere because people have their own burdens to carry. Instead, offer potential solutions when you identify problems, or say nothing at all.

2. *Smile a lot.* The next time you look in a mirror, consider this: Do you have more of a "no" face or a "yes" face? Does your expression tell the world to leave you alone, or that you're friendly and approachable?

If, like mine, it's more no than yes, try this out. Experiment with smiling more often, even if you don't feel like it. Do it consistently throughout the day and then watch how others respond to you. You might be pleasantly surprised (and they will be, too).

3. *Listen closely and actively.* When I was in grade school, my grandfather often said to me (in a distinctly Italian accent): "You hear but you don't listen!" He was usually right. I could parrot back what was said to me, but I didn't always process it, much less obey it.

When it comes to interpersonal relations, that's a blunder bigger than the lasagna that mama used to make. And the result is

frustration and repetition—frustration because people hate being ignored; repetition because they'll try to remedy the problem by repeating what they just said.

Try this instead. *Concentrate*. Make a genuine effort to listen to everything that's being said to you, rather than letting your mind wander to something more interesting—or to what you want to say in response. Then, especially if there is the potential for disagreement or misunderstanding, paraphrase what the person has just communicated. Be patient here and briefly summarize their concerns, points, or ramblings as a preface to your own rejoinder. That person will know that they've been heard and, in reciprocation, they'll be more likely to listen to you.

You'll reap what you sow here. Communication will improve and so might the relationship. And you'll never again have to worry about getting tugged around by the ear because you hear but you don't listen.

4. Make them feel valued. The bigger the world gets, the smaller we feel. In fact, people are *starving* to hear that they're valued and relevant. So feed them. Let them know you see they're working hard, that they're doing a good job, that they're making a contribution that matters.

Try it with your spouse, your kids, your employees, and your friends. Even that alienated extended-family member. Be an encourager and an affirmer. There is no straighter path to building up people and building your relationships.

5. Say "thank you" more than you think you should. Gratitude is a cousin of affirmation. When someone has made an effort from which you benefit—even if it's something they're expected or paid to do—let them know that you appreciate it. Make a habit of expressing gratitude. People feel entitled to it and when it's withheld, resentment fills the vacuum. By contrast, when you express gratitude, you'll instantly make that person's day.

So thank your spouse for taking out the trash or for doing the dishes, not just for the special things. Thank your employees for

their effort, even if it doesn't always produce fruit. Thank the mail carrier for being so reliable. Then watch their faces brighten. Gratitude costs you nothing and it gives them much. Awesome ROI.

6. *Talk about their interests.* Try this the next time you're at some stuffy social function. Make a game of it, if you'd like. Rather than hoping for opportunities to tell people how great you are, and rather than just making small talk about the five-day forecast, talk about the other person's interests. Set yourself aside for the evening and learn about those around you.

This person is an office manager and a mother? Ask about the job and about her kids. That person has a Star Wars shirt? Ask about Star Wars. It doesn't matter that you don't really care about Yoda or understand his backward grammar. The person in front of you is a fan, so start there.

People love to talk about their interests, so give them the opportunity to do so. They'll remember you for it, too, since you've basically given them a gift that's increasingly rare in our narcissistic society.

By the way, this technique works away from parties as well. Try it the next time you see that neighbor who's been giving you the cold shoulder.

7. *Remember every name.* Some people have an uncanny ability to remember names. The rest of us find creative ways to hide the fact that we've forgotten them. "Hello, friend. Oh, hi there buddy. Welcome, brother. Great to see all of you again!"

It's been said that someone's name is the sweetest word that person ever hears, so make that sweet sound often. You'll do more than impress them. You'll make them feel memorable.

8. *Make a sacrifice for them.* Words are powerful, but a sincere sacrifice of time or money is often better. Get in the habit of identifying and meeting people's needs, even putting their needs ahead of your own.

Nothing—*nothing*—will earn you more friends than sacrifice. And if you're evangelistically-minded, nothing will earn you the right to be heard on important issues like your faith.

9. Use self-depreciating humor. Don't hesitate to poke fun at yourself. In a world where people are full of themselves and often hint at their own importance, self-depreciating humor can instantly make you attractive. So go ahead, make fun of your flaws. Knock yourself down a few notches. Paradoxically, it will probably raise you up in the eyes of others.

10. Focus on your similarities. A mountain of research bears witness to what might be obvious, but what we sometimes forget: We're more likely to be influenced by people who are similar to us than by those who are different. If you've been where they are—if you've endured their pain or shared an experience—or even if you look and talk and dress like they do, they'll be more likely to connect with you. To listen to you. Even to confide in you. Center on the similar.

11. Create "social relaxation." That has nothing to do with offering your guest a comfortable chair. It has everything to do with creating an environment where people are at ease in your presence and feel comfortable talking to you.

How? For the most part, through an amalgam of the practices listed here. Smile, compliment them, express a real interest in them and so on. But it also happens through non-verbal behaviors that imply you care: eye contact, listening empathetically, nodding in understanding, facing them squarely rather than sitting at an angle. When you put people at ease, you're more likely to have a substantive conversation.

12. Talk about your own mistakes while raising theirs. You might be a perfectionist, but you're not perfect. If you want to get somebody to listen to you about mistakes they've made, start by identifying your own. They'll certainly listen to that! As you do, you'll make it safer for them to own up to their faults. Consider it in

your next performance review, or your next argument at home.

13. *Don't assume you're right.* This assumption derails more conversations, fuels more fights, and extinguishes more win-win solutions than any other. I'm not always right; that's pretty obvious. But in the midst of a conflict, that somehow becomes less obvious to me. And then it creates problems.

Frankly, that's just ego. Pride. Proverbs calls it folly. But here's a way forward from The Harvard Negotiation Project: Mentally reframe the dialogue as "a learning conversation" rather than as an argument.³ Conceptualize it as an opportunity to glean what you can from the other person as you make your own case. Maybe your colleague really does have some information you don't. Maybe your mother-in-law actually does have some wisdom she can pass along to you.

Making this mental leap from "telling" to "learning" is game-changer. It also reduces the number of times that we'll have to use Tip Number 14.

14. *Apologize.* Just say it. Go ahead. It won't kill you. Besides, you probably owe it to the person. "I...was...wrong. I'm...sorry." Tack on a "please forgive me" and you'll be liberated indeed. Beware, though. The resulting rush of peace may cause you to smile. Then you'll look just like the person to whom you're speaking.

15. *Never, ever gossip—ever.* Many of us don't even realize we're doing it, bonding with someone by tarnishing someone else's reputation. That's gossip, plain and simple. If what you're about to say undermines the reputation of a person who's not in the conversation, think first about why you're really saying it. Then, in most cases, bite your lip. Or change the subject.

16. *Don't interrupt when someone is speaking.* And never complete their thought for them either. That infuriates many people, whether they show it or not. If you have this problem, review Tip Number 3 ("Listen closely and actively"). Then put a new background on your phone that says "Shut up and listen!"

17. Never say “you’re wrong.” Think about how you felt the last time someone said those exact words to you. Did it help to resolve the problem, or did it escalate it? These words rarely persuade, so banish them from your vocabulary. And please, don’t tell me I’m wrong about this.

18. Don’t communicate when you’re angry. Sometimes it’s unavoidable, but often it’s not. Most of us do an exceedingly poor job of making our point when our brains are clouded by anger. And then we get even angrier—at ourselves for not communicating well—exacerbating the problem. Just step away and perhaps talk to God about it.

One quick corollary while we’re on the topic: Never send an email or text when you’re mad. Same rule, different medium. If you send it, your diatribe will be on record for all posterity. Just say no to angry replies.

19. Make self-examination a habit. Am I using these skills daily? Where can I improve? What’s working and what’s not? As with any self-improvement process, we need to take inventory regularly to assess how we’re doing. Reflect on your people skills as you use them, and then find ways to improve your weaker areas.

20. Practice these practices. People skills are like any other skills. The more you use them, the more adept you become. If you’re serious about “perfecting” your people skills, there’s no shortcut. Of course, practice won’t make you perfect, but it will make you better.

Prioritize Your People Skills

Let’s finish where we started, with the story that opened this chapter. I’d like to report that Tim is now succeeding more than ever. I’d like to report that my analysis provided breakthrough advice that Tim embraced. And I’d like to report that he now leads a high-performing work group.

But unfortunately, my recommendation that Tim “be devel-

oped or transferred to an analyst position” is still gathering dust on a shelf. Years later, many of the nameplates are different in Tim’s group, but the lackluster results are the same.

Frankly, that’s not just Tim’s fault. Those above him have not fixed the problem, to the detriment of the ministry.

You can make a wiser choice. In your own professional development, and in the development of the people you lead, recognize that to get results, the soft skills matter as much as the hard, quantitative skills. Hire and cultivate leaders who have the interpersonal ability—the proverbial “sweetness of speech”—to persuade others to follow.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you think of the theory that our external “people skills” flow from our internal “heart” disposition? Can’t we engage in these practices regardless of what we believe or feel?
2. What people skills, if any, would you add to the list of 20 in this chapter?
3. Looking across the 20 techniques, as well as any that you added from Question 2, in which areas would you like to develop?
4. Do you have some way to assess your people skills? Many leaders seem to think they’re doing much better in this area than they really are, and they remain blind to their developmental needs. Do you know some people who can “speak the truth in love” to you here, offering you a candid evaluation?