



LEADING SMART

40 LESSONS IN 40 YEARS

WISDOM FOR THE LONG HAUL

BY TIM STEVENS

INTRODUCTION

This summer marks a milestone I never imagined when I first stepped into full-time ministry: 40 years of serving the local church. I've spent four decades on staff serving in, with, and around churches. I've built teams and raised money, led board meetings and budget reviews, coached young leaders and navigated conflict and turmoil. I've seen the church at its most beautiful—and at its most broken. And I've never stopped believing that the local church, when it's healthy, is still the hope of the world.

With this milestone, I've found myself reflecting. Not just on memories, but on the patterns, themes, and hard-won truths that have carried me through. The lessons that stuck. The ones I wish I had learned sooner. The things I'd pass on to the next generation of pastors, church leaders, and anyone navigating the unique world of ministry leadership.

This little book isn't exhaustive, but it is honest. It's a collection of 40 lessons, each forged in real-life leadership—not the green room. Some are simple, some are challenging, and all of them are grounded in one hope: that you'll lead with wisdom, courage, and longevity. Under each lesson, you'll find a next step—a resource, a question, or a small challenge—to help you put the insight into practice. Because we don't just need more ideas. We need healthy leaders who last.

I hope these lessons serve you like they've served me. Let's keep learning. Let's keep leading.



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1. CHEMISTRY MATTERS MORE THAN YOU THINK

You can teach skills, but you can't teach chemistry. The health of your team often comes down to the intangibles—how people interact, trust, and communicate. Over the years, I've seen high-capacity individuals derail momentum simply because they couldn't play well with others. And I've watched average talent accomplish incredible things when the chemistry clicked. Hire slowly, and always prioritize chemistry over raw credentials.

RESOURCE

Read *The Ideal Team Player* by Patrick Lencioni and use the assessment to identify candidates who will fit your team.

2. DRUCKER WAS RIGHT: CULTURE EATS STRATEGY FOR BREAKFAST

No matter how brilliant your strategic plan, it will be undermined by a toxic culture. Culture isn't just a vibe—it's how your team behaves when no one's watching. It's shaped by what you celebrate, tolerate, and model. Invest in culture early and often. Because if you ignore it, it will still grow—just probably in the wrong direction.

ACTION

Take the LeadingSmart Culture Assessment and talk to our team about how you can take steps on improving staff health.

3. WHAT GOT YOU HERE WON'T GET YOU THERE

Leadership is seasonal. What worked to get you through your church plant or your first building campaign might be the very thing holding you back in the next chapter. The temptation is to cling to what's familiar, but effective leaders keep evolving. You have to adapt your mindset, your methods, and your systems—or risk becoming the lid on your own growth.

REFLECTION

List three habits that served you in a previous season but might be holding you back now.



4. CLARITY IS KINDNESS

Unclear expectations are a recipe for confusion, frustration, and drama. Whether you're coaching a staff member, casting vision, or navigating conflict, clarity shows respect. It gives people something solid to stand on. Don't hide behind vague language or spiritual jargon—say the hard thing, kindly and clearly. People deserve to know where they stand.

PRACTICE

Choose one direct but kind conversation you've been avoiding—and have it this week.

5. YOU CAN'T DELEGATE VISION

Vision leaks. And when it does, people fill the vacuum with their own assumptions. As the senior leader, you have to be the chief reminding officer—over and over again. You can delegate lots of things, but not vision. If you're not talking about the "why," don't be surprised when people lose their way.

CHALLENGE

Ask your lead team to each write down the vision for the organization over the next five years. Are they very similar? Good job. If not, get to work clarifying and embedding the vision from the top to the bottom.

6. LONGEVITY COMES FROM RHYTHMS, NOT JUST GRIT

Ministry can chew you up if you let it. I've known too many leaders who ran hard for a decade and then crashed. Grit will get you through a crisis, but only rhythms will sustain you through decades. Build in rest, boundaries, family time, and spiritual renewal. And don't wait until you're on empty to refuel.

TOOLS

Build a personal rhythm worksheet using the [Rule of Life template](#) from Emotionally Healthy Discipleship.



7. WHAT GETS CELEBRATED GETS REPEATED

If you want to shape culture, pay attention to what you celebrate. Whether it's a story on stage, a public thank-you, or a staff email shoutout—when you name and affirm something, people notice. Celebration creates clarity. It reinforces what matters most and invites others to emulate it.

ACTION

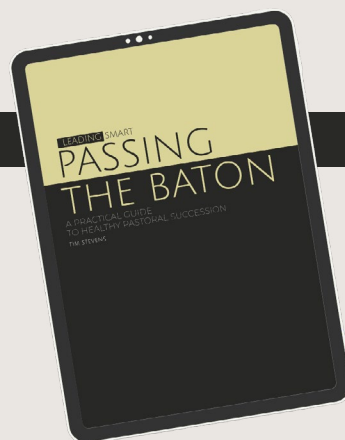
Write down the five most important strategic drivers that bring you success, and find ways to repeatedly celebrate success in those areas. Ignore other wins that are secondary and possibly even distracting to your mission.

8. SUCCESS WITHOUT SUCCESSION IS FAILURE

If the ministry can't thrive without you, then you didn't really lead—you just performed. True leadership is about multiplication, not dependence. The earlier you start thinking about succession, the healthier your church and your legacy will be. Don't wait until you're exhausted or ready to retire. Build leaders now.

READ

Download *Passing the Baton: A Practical Guide to Healthy Pastoral Succession*, the e-book by Tim Stevens and the LeadingSmart team, and listen to season one of The LeadingSmart Podcast all about healthy succession.



LEADINGSMART SUCCESSION

We walk you and your team through steps to best prepare for a transition that serves everyone in your organization.

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Ready? Learn more here!

9. DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF ENCOURAGEMENT

One sentence of encouragement at the right time can do more than a 30-minute sermon. We forget how much people are carrying—and how rarely they're told they're doing a good job. A text, a handwritten note, a kind word in the hallway—these moments may feel small to you, but they're fuel for someone else.

HABIT

Start each Monday by writing one encouraging note to someone on your team. Put it on your calendar so you don't forget.

10. THE BOARD NEEDS TO BE ALIGNED, NOT JUST INFORMED

Many pastors make the mistake of simply reporting to their board instead of leading it. A disengaged or misaligned board slows everything down. But when the board and staff are aligned around mission, values, and outcomes, you get momentum. Build relationships. Over-communicate. Clarify roles. And steward that unity like it's sacred—because it is.

RESOURCE

[Schedule a conversation](#) with LeadingSmart to see how their team can come alongside your board for alignment and clarity.

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11. EVERY CHARISMATIC LEADER NEEDS A SYSTEMS INTEGRATOR

Charisma can fill a room, but it can't run an organization. Every visionary leader needs someone who thinks in spreadsheets, systems, and sequencing. It's not about personality—it's about structure. Pairing inspiration with integration is what takes a ministry from flash-in-the-pan to faithfully effective.

READ

Rocket Fuel by Gino Wickman and Mark Winters to discover the importance of the “integrator” role.

12. THERE'S NO WIN IN COMPARISON

Looking sideways will only distract you from the race God called you to run. It's easy to compare numbers, stage design, or social media reach—but comparison rarely leads to joy. Celebrate others. Learn from them. But stay grounded in your own calling. God's not grading you on someone else's scorecard.

PRACTICE

Take a one-week break from Instagram, church podcasts, blogs, or other inputs that trigger comparison.

13. YOUR BEST IDEAS WON'T COME FROM BEHIND A DESK

You don't innovate in isolation. The best ideas are usually born out of real conversations with real people—volunteers, first-time guests, staffers who see the cracks. Don't wait for a retreat center to get inspired. Inspiration is hiding in the lobby, the parking lot, or the preschool hallway.

ACTION

Spend 30 minutes this week shadowing a volunteer or newcomer at your church. See what they see, feel what they feel.

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14. SOMETIMES THE MOST STRATEGIC THING YOU CAN DO IS SAY NO

Every yes is a no to something else. If you're always adding and never pruning, you'll end up with a bloated calendar and a diluted mission. Saying no isn't selfish—it's stewardship. Protect the vision. Say no with grace and without apology.

TOOL

Create a "Stop Doing" list with your leadership team. Ask: "What are we doing because we've always done it" and "What's not producing fruit anymore?"

15. CONFLICT ISN'T THE ENEMY— AVOIDANCE IS

Conflict handled well is how trust deepens and teams grow. The real danger is pretending everything's fine while bitterness brews under the surface. Don't ghost the tension. Name it. Step toward it. Healthy conflict clears the air and strengthens the culture.

READ

*Crucial
Conversations*

by Patterson,
Grenny,
McMillan, &
Switzler.

16. YOU CAN'T MICROWAVE TRUST

Trust is earned in drips and lost in buckets. There's no shortcut. It's built through consistency, humility, and time. If you want people to follow you through change, they have to trust your heart—and that only happens when your actions match your words.

ACTION

Make a list of stakeholders where trust is lacking, and make time for ongoing relational connection with each. Ask questions, listen to their story, discover what they are passionate about.

17. EVERYONE IS AN INTERIM

Whether you lead for five years or fifty, your time in a role is temporary. And that's not a threat—it's a gift. It frees you to lead with urgency and humility. Don't hold your position too tightly. Steward it for the next person. Build what lasts beyond you.

REFLECTION

What do you enjoy outside of your ministry job? Your life post-ministry can be a beautiful next chapter—one where your impact continues, your relationships deepen, and your soul finally breathes.

18. YOUR FAMILY IS NOT YOUR MINISTRY

Your first church is at home. Ministry demands a lot, but if your spouse and kids always get the leftovers, something's broken. Go home before the work is done. Let your kids see you say no to church stuff for their sake. They'll remember that more than your sermons.

ACTION

Plan one tech-free family night this week. No church talk allowed. If you have kids, do the same with each kid individually once a month.

19. SYSTEMS ARE PASTORAL

Good systems aren't just efficient—they're loving. When a guest gets followed up with, when a volunteer knows what to expect, when a new staff member is onboarded well—it all says, "You matter." Systems communicate care. Don't dismiss them as business stuff. They're deeply spiritual.

RESOURCE

Listen to the podcast titled "[How to Fix Your Broken Systems](#)" from Tony Morgan and The Unstuck Group.

20. SMALL THINGS BECOME BIG THINGS

In leadership, the little things are rarely little. A side comment, a slight tone, a broken promise—these ripple out. At the same time, a thoughtful note, a sincere apology, or a remembered birthday builds credibility. Pay attention to the small stuff. It's always doing more than you think.

PRACTICE

Ask your assistant or a trusted peer, "What's a little thing I've been missing lately?"

21. YOUR WORDS WEIGH MORE THAN YOU THINK

In leadership, there are no throwaway comments. That offhand remark you make in a hallway conversation might be quoted for years. Your words carry authority, whether you realize it or not. Be thoughtful. Be intentional. Speak life. Because what you say might just shape what someone believes about themselves—or about God.

CHALLENGE

After your next meeting, ask a trusted associate how you could have communicated differently, as it relates to your words or your tone.

22. HIRE SLOWLY. FIRE KINDLY. ALWAYS WITH CLARITY.

Staffing is one of the most sacred responsibilities of leadership. Rushing into a hire almost always leads to regret, and dragging your feet on a termination often causes deeper harm. Move slowly and prayerfully on the front end. When it's time for someone to leave, be direct but kind. Clarity is one of the most honoring gifts you can give.

READ

Indeed.com has published some great insights in [How to Fire an Employee: Three Things You Must Never Do.](#)

23. FIND THE GENIUS IN THE ROOM

You don't have to have all the answers. In fact, you shouldn't. The best leaders ask great questions and then listen—really listen. Your job is to draw out the wisdom in others, not dominate the conversation. When people feel heard and valued, they rise to the occasion. There's genius in the room. Find it.

CHECK OUT

Tim's article [Are you a Genius? Or Genius-Maker?](#) and then pick up a copy of the book [Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter.](#)

24. PEOPLE LEAVE. DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY.

No matter how healthy your church or how loving your leadership, people will leave. Staff. Volunteers. Longtime members. Sometimes it's painful. Sometimes it's confusing. And often, it's not about you. Bless them. Stay steady. Keep your heart open—and keep leading.

ACTION

Write a prayer of release and blessing over someone who recently left your church or team.



25. MOMENTUM IS FRAGILE

When you've got momentum, it feels like everything is working. And when you don't, it feels like nothing is. Momentum is a gift—and a responsibility. It can evaporate quickly with a few poor decisions or internal misalignments. Guard it. Steward it. Name it when you see it, and never take it for granted.

WATCH

[The Law of the Big Mo](#) by John Maxwell. It's only 13 minutes and well worth your time.

26. LEAD WHERE YOU ARE

Leadership isn't about titles—it's about influence. Some of the most catalytic people in an organization don't have the top job. They lead from the middle or even the margins. If you're waiting for a platform before you start leading, you'll probably never get one. Show up. Step in. Own your space.

ACTION

Identify one area where you can lead with initiative—even if it's not in your job description.

EXECUTIVE COACHING WITH LEADINGSMART

Tim will engage with your organization and provide strategic guidance to help your leaders resolve the issues your team is facing.

Ready? Learn more here!



27. A CHURCH IS NOT A MACHINE

It's tempting to treat church like an organization to run or a product to deliver. But the church is a body. A family. A movement. People aren't cogs in a machine—they're souls to shepherd. Efficiency matters, but transformation is the goal. Don't lose sight of the mystery and beauty of what you're really stewarding.

PRACTICE

Walk through your lobby this Sunday with fresh eyes. Where does it feel human? What needs attention?

28. YOU DON'T HAVE TO KNOW WHAT'S NEXT TO BE FAITHFUL NOW

We love clarity. We crave vision boards, 5-year plans, and certainty. But more often, God gives just enough light for the next step. You don't have to map out the whole future to be obedient today. Faithfulness in the now prepares you for what's next.

REFLECTION

Journal a list of "the next right things" you already know to do. Start with the first one and do it.

29. LEGACY IS THE LEADERSHIP YOU LEAVE BEHIND

Legacy isn't about buildings, budgets, or accolades. It's about people. Who is leading better because you invested in them? Who has more courage, wisdom, or clarity because you showed up in their life? That's your legacy. Start building it now.

ACTION

Write a note or record a short video for someone younger in ministry whom you've invested in.

30. YOU WILL NEVER REGRET INVESTING IN THE NEXT GENERATION

There's a kind of kingdom return that only comes when you pour into those coming behind you. Give them the mic. Invite them to the table. Let them fail and cheer them on when they do. The future of the church isn't tomorrow—it's already here. And it needs your voice of belief.

INVEST

Sponsor a young adult to join a Generation Distinct cohort so they can discover the wrong they were born to make right.



31. THINK ABOUT THE LONG GAME

It's easy to get obsessed with what's urgent—this Sunday's service, this month's metrics, this year's budget. But the most impactful leaders are thinking in decades, not just quarters. Make decisions your future self (and your successor) will thank you for. Short-term wins matter, but legacy leadership takes long-term vision.

EXERCISE

Block 1 hour to map your next decade—not with goals, but with values.

32. MINISTRY IS MESSY—LEAD ANYWAY

Ministry isn't clean or predictable. People are messy. Plans unravel. Systems break. If you're waiting for perfect clarity or ideal conditions, you'll miss your calling. Lean into the chaos. Show up anyway. That's where the real shepherding begins.

REFLECTION

What mess are you tempted to avoid right now? Write it down and take one step into it this week.

33. SOMETIMES THE MOST SPIRITUAL THING YOU CAN DO IS TAKE A NAP

We tend to spiritualize hustle and demonize rest. But even Jesus took naps. Sabbath isn't weakness—it's obedience. If you're exhausted, burned out, and emotionally fried, you're not helping anyone. Rest well. It's part of the job.

PRACTICE

Pick a day this month to truly Sabbath. No work. No email. No guilt.

34. MEETINGS REVEAL YOUR CULTURE

You only have to attend a few meetings to see whether the culture is positive or negative. Are people heard? Is there clarity? Do hard conversations happen, or get buried in side comments and sarcasm? Are there meetings after the meetings where the real truth is told? The way you meet says more than you think.

TOOL

Talk to us about bringing in LeadingSmart to assess and train your team on The Six Types of Working Genius. We can help your meetings become the most productive hour of the week rather than a dreaded waste of time.

35. DON'T LEAD ALONE

Loneliness in leadership is real—and dangerous. You weren't meant to carry the weight by yourself. Pursue relationships with people who know the real you, not just the public version. Leadership is heavy. Don't do it without friends.

STEP

Find a counselor or therapist to help you unpack the parts of you that make connecting with others difficult. One I'd recommend is the [Living Centered Intensive](#) at OnSite.

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36. TAKE YOUR FUN WITH YOU

Ministry is demanding, but it doesn't have to be joyless. If you're waiting for fun to show up, it probably won't. Bring the laughter. Plan the celebration. Lighten the room. Joy is contagious—and deeply spiritual.

CHALLENGE

Plan something fun with your team this month that has zero strategic value.

37. THE OLDER I GET, THE LESS I KNOW

There's a humility that comes with time. Early in leadership, you feel the pressure to have all the answers. But the older I get, the more I realize how much I still have to learn. Stay curious. Stay open. The best leaders are still being shaped.

READ

A Burning in My Bones (biography of Eugene Peterson) for a lived example of humble wisdom.

38. TRUTH ROLLS DOWNHILL

The higher you go in leadership, the harder it is to get honest feedback. The day you become the leader is the last day you hear the truth. If you want the truth, you have to go looking for it—often down the org chart. Create safe spaces, ask real questions, and actually listen.

ACTION

Call three frontline staff or volunteers this week and ask, “What do I need to know that no one’s telling me?” You’ll have to ask three times before they believe you really want to know.

39. ALWAYS BELIEVE THE BEST

Assume good intentions, even when communication is clumsy or emotions are high. Most people aren’t out to sabotage—they’re just trying to be faithful with what they know. Believing the best creates a culture of grace, which opens the door for growth.

PRACTICE

Next time you feel hurt, pause and ask, “What’s the most generous explanation I can assume?”

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40. THE MOST IMPORTANT TASK OF A LEADER IS SPOTTING TALENT

Your greatest contribution might not be something you do—but someone you empower. Great leaders see potential early. They call it out, develop it, and make space for it. Spot the gift, give it room, and cheer loudly from the sidelines.

ACTION

Begin “shoulder tapping” and intentionally calling out potential. Send a short message, text, or pull someone aside to say, “I see something in you.” It could be leadership, wisdom, communication, hospitality—whatever it is, name it clearly and affirm it boldly.



If you've made it this far, thank you. I don't take your time lightly. My hope is that somewhere in these 40 lessons, you found a reminder that you're not alone, a challenge that stirred your thinking, or a bit of wisdom that gives you strength for the road ahead.

Ministry is beautiful, but let's be honest—it can also be exhausting. It's filled with unseen sacrifices, long days, spiritual battles, and emotional weight. I've felt the grind. I've known the seasons of discouragement, doubt, and decision fatigue. And I've also experienced the joy of watching lives change, teams thrive, and leaders grow into their calling.

So if no one has said it to you lately—thank you. For staying faithful. For showing up. For pouring your life into something that matters.

At LeadingSmart, our entire purpose is to serve you and the church you lead. If I or my team can ever be a sounding board, a thought partner, or simply a listening ear, please don't hesitate to reach out. We'd love to have a conversation.

You matter. Your work matters. And I'm cheering you on.

Tim Stevens

LeadingSmart.com



SEASON TWO

40 LESSONS IN 40 YEARS OF MINISTRY

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