Thriving in the Second Chair – Mike Bonem

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**Excerpt 1**

**CLARIFYING YOUR ROLE**

“And all other duties as may be assigned.” This is commonly the last line in a job description, but the practical reality for many second chair leaders is that this is their first responsibility. This simple truth can be frustrating and confusing.

It’s confusing when you’re not sure what your priorities should be or when you can’t plan your day. It’s frustrating if you feel like your performance will be evaluated based on an arbitrary set of expectations or if you feel like your time or talents are being wasted. You may wonder why it’s so difficult to develop a job description or if you’re the only one who has these struggles.

You’re not. When I’m working with a group of second chair leaders, I often ask them to think about their job description (written or verbal). Then I ask them to reflect on how well their actual jobs match this description. This usually results in a moment of laughter as well as a new awareness that they’re not alone in their lack of role clarity.

In *Leading from the Second Chair,* Roger Patterson and I defined a second chair leader as “a person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the entire organization.” It’s a definition that is not limited to a specific title such as executive pastor or executive director. And while this is still my working definition for what it means to be a second chair leader, I recognize that this definition does little to clarify the role.

One of the practices that allows second chair leaders to thrive is clarifying their role as much as possible. In saying this, I recognize that some degree of ambiguity will always be part of a second chair leader’s job. The best second chair leaders accept this reality while at the same seeking clarity where it is most needed.

They also recognize that a variety of factors can hinder clarity. The challenges of second chair role clarity tend to fall into one of five categories:

* Responsibilities and expectations for the job are not well-defined at all.
* Responsibilities were well-defined at one time, but the current reality is quite different.
* A significant gap exists between responsibilities and authority.
* The second chair leader has gifts and abilities that aren’t being used.
* A transition has occurred – either in the first chair or within the executive team.

Each of these categories has unique challenges, but the one that I hear most often is the lack of clear definition. In those same workshops where I ask second chair leaders about their roles, someone inevitably tells me that they’ve never had anything that would pass for a written or verbal job description. Perhaps there was a brief conversation about the position or a few bullet points written on a napkin over lunch one day, but it was never formalized. This is most common when someone is promoted into a second chair role from within the church or ministry, or when a church member is brought onto the staff in a newly created second chair position.

In these cases, “all other duties as may be assigned” isn’t just the primary responsibility for the job. It becomes the only responsibility because of the lack of other defined duties. Even in cases where some sort of job description exists, clarity is often lacking.

Vagueness is the hallmark of this challenge. For example, the senior pastor may have said, “I need you to help me manage the staff.” What does that mean? Do staff members report to the first chair or the second chair? What “help” is needed? Which “staff” are you helping to manage? Or a first chair may have stated that your primary job is to “implement the vision.” Is the vision clear? Are you responsible for interpreting the vision at the next level of detail? How much freedom do you have to implement?

From your perspective, it seems obvious that some sort of job description is appropriate and helpful. But what about from your first chair’s perspective? You may be working for a classic visionary who simply doesn’t think in these terms. Or in the case of a newly created second chair position, your first chair may not know what is possible in this role.

Regardless of the underlying cause, it is pointless to “demand” a real job description from your first chair. Demanding will only create tension, not a meaningful job description. Does that mean that you’re doomed to live in ambiguity? No, because there is another option.

If you’re frustrated that your role is not well-defined, you can take the initiative to create clarity. While it may seem odd or even arrogant, second chair leaders in these situations often need to draft (or revise) their own job descriptions.

The key in doing this is the second chair’s attitude and intentions. Taking initiative in this way must not be seen as an attempt to usurp authority or undermine the first chair. Effective second chair leaders will ask for permission to create a *draft* job description. They will explain that their purpose is to start a conversation that will bring clarity to their role and fruitfulness to the church or ministry. Conversation is the key. The draft document starts a discussion between the first and second chair that clarifies their roles and how they relate to each other. In most cases, multiple discussions are needed to bring about this clarity.

So if you have permission and know that you need to create a job description, where should you start? Ask yourself the following questions:

* What would most help to advance the mission of our church or ministry? What areas are falling short of their potential? “Areas” could be specific departments, major initiatives, or organization-wide systems.
* What are my first chair’s biggest needs? Where is she overwhelmed? Where does he have leadership gaps that need to be supplemented?
* What am I most passionate about? In what ways will my gifts allow me to make the greatest contribution?
* How should my role be defined so that it moves toward a partnership and clearly demonstrates my support for the first chair?

When a second chair’s job has never been well-defined, this process can begin a conversation that brings much needed clarity to the role. But a job description is only a starting point. It will never fully capture the nuances and the ever changing dynamics of the second chair.

The reality is that *flexibility* is one of the hallmarks of thriving second chair leaders. They know that there will always be ambiguity in their roles, so they thrive by living in the balance between pursuing clarity and demonstrating flexibility. If you’re feeling out of balance, what steps do you need to take today?

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**Excerpt 2**

**EXTEND YOUR “SHELF LIFE” – JUST SAY “NO”**

“Does a second chair leader have a shelf life?” The question caught me by surprise. I had never thought about the idea that a person’s effectiveness in the second chair might have an expiration date. This idea suggests that a second chair leader comes into the role to do a job – which might take a number of years – and then eventually gets stale like a loaf of bread on the shelf at the grocery store.

If this is true, it presents a dilemma for second chair leaders: stick around despite decreasing impact and satisfaction, or leave. But these are not the only options. In their best-selling book, *Decisive*, the Heath brothers (Chip and Dan) refer to this as “narrow framing.” It’s what happens when someone *narrows* a decision down to a simple “whether or not” or “yes or no” choice.

The second chair leader that feels stagnant or burned out can easily fall victim to narrow framing by asking, “Is it time for me to leave?” This closed-ended question seems to offer only two choices – yes or no, stay or go. The Heaths say it's a mistake to ask the question this way. Instead, it’s important to “widen your options.” But what are those wider options? Is it possible to extend your shelf life?

To answer this question, it’s helpful to understand the factors that can shorten a second chair’s shelf life. One common culprit is “role creep.” Second chair leaders often find themselves doing all sorts of things that weren’t part of their original job description. New duties are added, but nothing is taken away. It’s like turning on the water to fill the sink. At first, the sink has plenty of capacity for more water. But at some point, you have to open the drain or the water overflows, creating a huge mess.

If role creep and the overload that often comes with it are constantly lurking enemies of thriving, then it seems clear that the answer is to say “no.” Of course, it’s never that simple or clear because there are many different circumstances where you need to say “no” and many different ways of doing so.

The easiest, and yet often hardest, is to say “no” to those activities that clearly do not align with your abilities and priorities. It may be the invitation to show up at every single church gathering or to attend certain meetings just because you’re the boss or you “always have a good perspective.” These are the easiest because you know what your answer should be. They can be the hardest because your own feelings of guilt or self-worth somehow keep the “no” from being verbalized. Conquering this demon requires self-examination, greater awareness, and often an accountability partner who will challenge you to say “no” more often.

At other times, the answer isn’t quite as obvious. When a real need exists and you have the ability to meet that need, it is difficult to say “no.” In those moments, the opening words of Jim Collins’ classic book, *Good to Great*, should echo in your mind: “Good is the enemy of great.” It’s easy to become overwhelmed doing good things, those activities that help others and leverage your gifts. But in saying “yes” to the good, you may preclude the possibility of doing something even more important or significant. Simply saying, “Let me get back to you” rather than saying “yes” may give you the space you need to make this determination.

In many cases, you can say “not me” without saying “no.” First chair leaders often delegate to their second chairs the important tasks that they don’t want to do or don’t have time for. Unfortunately, many second chairs are hesitant do to the same. A willingness to pass the responsibility to another staff member is a great way to say “no” without it being a “no.” Like opening the drain on the sink, it keeps you from being overloaded, even as new priorities are coming in. And just as importantly, it develops other leaders and communicates trust in them.

But what about those times when you and the entire team are overloaded, and the new request is a priority from your first chair. Can you say “no” to your boss? In many cases, you can. The best scenario is to sit down with your first chair and review all of the different things on your plate. Explain how the new request pushes you well beyond 100%, and ask for help with setting priorities or taking something off your plate. Even better, propose a solution that preserves organizational priorities and doesn’t burden your first chair. While many second chairs are reluctant to have this conversation, it often has a positive outcome. It’s not uncommon for a first chair to remark, “I didn’t realize you had so much to do” and then to shift some responsibilities.

Even if the outcome isn’t this positive, it is still the right conversation to have. You know your workload better than anyone else, and you should know the point at which workload becomes overload. You know that your family will pay a price if you don’t say “no.” It’s rare for someone else to say “no” on your behalf.

I know that each person and each context is unique. But I am confident in saying that second chair leaders often need to say “no” in one way or another, even in respectful or subtle ways to their first chair. And I am confident that getting clear about when to say “no” creates opportunities for you to say “yes” to things that may be life giving and mission critical. Finding the right ways to say “no” – and “yes” – are great ways for second chair leaders to extend their shelf lives.

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**Excerpt 3**

**MANAGEMENT BY WISHFUL THINKING?**

“I’m looking forward to a season when I’m not dealing with personnel issues.” Those words, spoken by the executive pastor of a large church, still ring in my ears, even though that was years ago. I also remember my response: “This might not be the right role for you.”

My answer may have been too blunt, but I believe that the message was correct. Second chair leaders generally carry a heavy responsibility related to staff. They are involved in hiring, training, developing, evaluating, promoting, reprimanding, rewarding, and firing. Even if the management responsibility is shared with a first chair leader or others, the second chair can’t escape this “burden.” Hence my response.

The best second chair leaders live in the tension of grace and stewardship, and they strive to achieve “both/and” as they relate to staff members. They give second chances, but they don’t give second chances for the fifth time. They understand that leaving someone in a position where they are floundering is not compassionate. They also understand that they have a stewardship responsibility, not just for financial resources, but also for helping staff members develop their gifts and succeed in their roles.

Practicing the both/and of grace plus stewardship is complicated. If you entered the second chair from the corporate arena, you may have a distinct advantage relative to many of your colleagues. Your former company may have done a great job in hiring and developing people. They may have been very fair and consistent in addressing performance problems.

But before you try to copy all of those practices, realize that you also have a distinct disadvantage. Personnel matters in ministry settings are almost always more complicated than in business. It is complicated when a long-time church member applies for a job and meets some, but not all, of the requirements. It’s complicated when a staff member who was a star performer doesn’t have the skills to go to the next level as the church grows. And it’s certainly complicated when you try to evaluate “effectiveness” for something that is inherently hard to assess, such as the quality of pastoral care.

Whether you entered the second chair from a business background or already had ministry experience, it’s likely that you will need to make several shifts in order to effectively manage and develop your staff. Some of these shifts focus more on grace while others emphasize stewardship. One of the most important is the shift from wishful thinking to intentionality. (All five shifts are described in my new book, *Thriving in the Second Chair*, in a chapter entitled, “Develop for the Future.”)

How often have you been in a conversation about a personnel-related issue that has been centered in wishful thinking? “If we just give our program director a little more time, she will get more organized.” “It’s just a busy season, so I’m sure that the workload for the financial office will be more manageable soon.” Wishful thinking often flows out of an over-emphasis on relationship and grace that neglects stewardship.

Statements like these may be accurate. The program director may get more organized. It may just be a busy season for the financial office. But often, the statements are simply a way to postpone a more difficult conversation. We may have hired the wrong person for the program director position. We may need to add a person in the financial office.

The shift toward greater intentionality starts with determining whether you are dealing with wishful thinking. A simple question can shed light on this: what leads us to believe that this statement is true? The program director may have been very organized in a previous job. The financial office may be closing the fiscal year and preparing for an audit. If the answer, however, sounds like, “I just think it’s going to get better,” then you’re probably dealing with wishes more than reality.

Sometimes it isn’t clear whether you’re dealing with wishful thinking. When this is the case, ask two other questions: how soon can we expect to see improvement? What would be the indicators that we’ve turned the corner on this issue? These questions accept the explanation that a situation is temporary, but they also establish a timeline for progress. If the timeline isn’t met, then it’s time for a different conversation.

Intentionality doesn’t mean being the bad guy or the gloomy doomsayer. It does mean saying, “I think we have an important issue here that’s not going away on its own. Can we discuss it and try to come up with a solution?” The solution may be training or administrative support for the program director. It may be a part-time person for the financial office.

The shift to intentionality is supported by a shift from *ideas to accountability*. Ministry leaders are often full of ideas. An animated brainstorming session may generate new and creative ways to expand a ministry or address a problem. But in the months after the brainstorming, will those ideas translate into action? Often the answer is “no.” Great ideas aren’t enough. Before the meeting ends, the decision on which ideas to pursue needs to be made, and responsibilities and deadlines need to be assigned. Second chairs are typically the ones who insure that this happens and hold people accountable for those assignments.

Shifting from wishful thinking to greater intentionality isn’t easy. In the moment, it’s almost always less painful to accept wishful thinking. In the long run, however, wishful thinking allows a problem to grow, which forces a more difficult conversation down the road. Intentionality can nip that problem in the bud. Is it time for you to shift away from wishful thinking?

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**Excerpt 4**

**ORGANIZING SELECTIVELY**

“To organize or not to organize? That is the question.” While this may be a bad take-off on Shakespeare, it’s a key issue for second chair leaders.

One possible response to this question is, “Don’t bother with it.” After all, churches and ministries will always be somewhat chaotic. They are relatively small entities (compared to corporations) in rapidly changing environments, and they rely on volunteers. Besides, some chaos is good because it leads to creativity and innovation that can stimulate needed changes.

It’s obvious that I think differently. “Organizing selectively” is one of the ten practices that allow a second chair to thrive. While some chaos can be a positive stimulus, too much chaos results in confusion and conflict and wasted resources. When needed systems are missing, volunteers quit, staff members work on the wrong priorities, and great ministry ideas flounder. When this happens, second chair leaders can’t thrive. That’s why organizing selectively is valuable.

“Organize” isn’t just referring to an organization chart. While that’s an important element, the organizational challenges that second chairs face are much broader. They include all of the different processes and systems of a church or ministry, from personnel policies to scheduling systems to budgeting to goal-setting and more.

In fact, this list highlights one problem. The organization challenge can feel endless. It’s not hard for second chair leaders to find areas that would benefit from more structure or from clear processes. The real challenge is knowing where to focus their efforts and how to work within a system that seems to be determined to remain chaotic.

Think for a minute about the wandering Hebrew people in the wilderness. Imagine that you’re a second chair leader with Moses. With God’s guidance, your leader has just led the thirsty masses to water. Moses might be able to thank God and walk away, but you’re envisioning a mob scene if you don’t get things organized quickly. Some sort of system is needed to make sure that everyone gets water and that no one gets trampled. Which tribe goes first? Does one person go and bring water back for the family or does each person go to the spring? Should all the people get water before any of the animals?

In this moment, you will focus on organizing the access to water. Frankly, you’re not going to thrive, or even rest, until you put a system in place and you’re sure that it’s working. You may next turn your attention to organizing the campsite. Where will everyone sleep? Where should the livestock be kept? In the middle of this, if someone suggests that you need to create a system to inventory all of the gold and jewels that were plundered from the Egyptians, you may laugh at them. It might be an interesting idea, but it doesn’t merit even a small footnote on your “to do” list.

This demonstrates the meaning and importance of organizing selectively. It’s not done to satisfy someone’s penchant for rules and order. It’s done so that the group – whether that’s a church or ministry or nomadic Israelites – can thrive. Because when they’re thriving, the second chair leader has a chance to do the same.

Across all different sizes and ages, churches and ministries are chronically under-organized. Notice that I did not say “disorganized.” While the “dis-“ label may be applicable in some cases, “under-“ is a more accurate description of reality. Better organization is almost always needed in multiple areas. These may include an informal performance review system that needs to be formalized, a better system to forecast cash flow, or consolidation of several overlapping databases.

Under-organization occurs in churches and ministries for a variety of reasons. The biggest is that they are constantly making decisions about how to allocate limited resources, and “ministry” typically wins out over “administration.” The trade-off is easy to understand. These entities exist for the purpose of doing ministry, whether it’s teaching children about Jesus, creating a more inviting worship experience, or conducting job training for individuals who are unemployed. It can difficult to make (much less win) an argument that upgrading software is more important than ministering to people. This argument applies equally to the money and the effort that may be required. As a result, the church or ministry’s systems will tend to lag behind until a crisis forces a change in priorities.

It is clear that a second chair leader will never run out of opportunities for filling organizational gaps in a church or ministry. But knowing that a gap exists doesn’t mean that it needs to be addressed. Taking an inventory of plundered gold may never become a priority.

Organizing selectively means focusing on the structures, processes, and systems that will have the greatest impact on the church or ministry. As you look at all the different areas that could be organized better, what systems and processes are most needed to accomplish the mission? Which will produce the greatest benefit relative to the cost? Even though every church or ministry is unique, my experience is that four important principles should be used to answer these questions:

* Put people first. Every ministry leader wants to have the right people, but few establish the right processes to insure this outcome.
* Translate vision into goals. If you do not have an effective way of translating the overall vision into ministry-specific goals, then you’re giving each person the freedom to do whatever they choose.
* Don’t reinvent the wheel. Many resources are available for second chair leaders who are willing to look and ask. If you want to accelerate your organizational efforts, take advantage of the work that others have done already.
* Remember that it’s not a business. If you’ve entered the second chair from the marketplace, you may need to shift your mindset. Be sensitive to your context and be prepared to adapt the “best practices” that you used in the past.

You know that you can’t organize everything. By organizing selectively, you can help yourself and your church to thrive by focusing on the places where structure is most needed and valuable.

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**Excerpt 5THINKING AND ACTING STRATEGICALLY**

If you ask a second chair leader what he or she “does,” you may hear a long list of tasks. These include managing and developing staff, creating systems for more effective ministry, and working with leadership teams, along with a variety of special projects. But if you ask about their greatest contribution to the organization, and give them a minute to reflect, their answer will typically point to their ability to think and act strategically.

Effective second chair leaders operate with a time horizon that is longer than today. They are making decisions based on the bigger picture. They are looking ahead, trying to prepare for the future and anticipate obstacles that could impede the organization’s progress.

If you are not a born strategist, this description may be too vague or philosophical. You may know that someone on your leadership team needs to think and act strategically, but you are looking for a more concrete understanding of how to do this. Let me offer four phrases to paint that picture.

Thinking strategically means *adding value throughout the organization*. This is what separates the second chair leader from other roles that are more narrowly focused on a specific area of ministry. Strategic thinking asks the question, “How can we best make progress toward our God-given vision?” To effectively answer this question, you must consider the bigger picture that spans the entire church or ministry and that looks over the next several months or even years. “Adding value throughout” is a mindset, not a specific job title. Even someone who has functional responsibility for an individual department can have organization-wide impact by thinking strategically.

When second chair leaders are thinking strategically, they act as *leaders, not managers*. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus coined this often-repeated distinction, explaining “Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right things” (*Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*). A manager, in this framework, tends to stay within the boundaries and follow established procedures. Leaders, on the other hand, will challenge those boundaries and procedures if they believe that there is a better way to accomplish the mission. Leaders are not content with the status quo. But effective leaders don’t make change just for the sake of shaking things up. They do so with the long-term mission in mind. An organization needs both, and second chairs often must function as managers, but strategic thinking calls for them to wear a leader’s hat at least some of the time.

This kind of thinking requires a second chair to *spend time above the weeds and below the clouds*. Most second chair leaders spend at least part of their time working on detailed, short-term issues. But if all of your time is spent in these “weeds,” it’s impossible to be strategic. It is equally unproductive to spend all of your time “in the clouds,” thinking about the highest level of vision. This may happen because it’s where a visionary leader likes to live or because a leadership team has developed a habit of pontificating but not making practical decisions. High level vision is important, but you can’t be effective if you stay in the clouds.

The space between clouds and weeds is the realm of strategy. A church may have a vision to be the resource of choice for families in its community. But what kind of family or need do they have in mind? What specific programs will they offer? Will they partner with other churches or agencies? These are the kinds of strategic questions that must be answered to move toward the vision. They should not be confused with “weedy,” tactical questions such as space requirements for one of the programs or job descriptions for the person leading the ministry.

That leads to the final phrase: *giving feet to the vision*. One of the hallmarks of second chairs that think strategically is that their churches and ministries are not stagnant. They are moving toward a vision with intentionality. They are setting priorities and allocating resources based on their understanding of how they can best achieve the vision.

Having “too many chiefs” can cause problems in any organization, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen one that suffered from being too strategic. Thinking and acting strategically is an opportunity for second chair leaders to thrive, and for their churches or ministries to soar.

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**Meme’s**

*Thriving in the Second Chair* - 1-sentence quotes

I've become convinced that it's not enough to lead from the second chair. Second chair leaders need to thrive, not just survive.

Second chair leaders need to thrive not only for their own well-being, but also for the benefit of the church or ministry that they serve.

“All other duties as may be assigned” is commonly the last line in a job description, but the practical reality for many second chair leaders is that this is their first responsibility.

Before you decide that your current role doesn’t adequately use your talents, engage in a conversation with your first chair.

Nowhere is flexibility more important for second chairs than when the church or ministry experiences a transition in first chair leaders.

Getting clear about when to say “no” creates opportunities for you to say “yes” to things that may be life giving and mission critical.

An under-challenged second chair leader is like a thoroughbred horse that is sold to a farmer and harnessed to a plow. It’s not a pretty picture, and it’s not good stewardship of a valuable resource.

Second chair leaders often find themselves doing all sorts of things that weren’t part of their original job description.

Reimagining can be a powerful exercise for the second chair leader who feels stale and thinks that changing jobs is the only way to get a fresh start.

The best second chair leaders live in the tension of grace and stewardship, and they strive to achieve “both/and” as they relate to staff members.

One of the most complicated dynamics is when first and second chair leaders don’t see eye-to-eye on personnel matters.

“To organize or not to organize? That is the question.” While this may be a bad take-off on Shakespeare, it’s a key issue for second chair leaders.

It’s not hard for second chair leaders to find areas that would benefit from more structure or from clear processes. The real challenge is knowing where to focus their efforts and how to work within a system that seems to be determined to remain chaotic.

Effective second chair leaders operate with a time horizon that is longer than today. They are looking ahead, trying to prepare for the future and anticipate obstacles that could impede the organization’s progress.

Most second chair leaders spend at least part of their time working on detailed, short-term issues, but if all their time is spent in the “weeds,” it’s impossible to be strategic.

The biggest obstacle to strategic thinking for second chair leaders isn’t a lack of aptitude or the complexity of the problem or a difficult first chair leader. The biggest obstacle is not taking the time to move to the balcony.

In the eyes of many second chairs, a partnership with their first chair is the pot of gold at the end of the leadership rainbow.

A successful partnership must be built on a common vision.

Being loyal does not mean that a second chair can’t disagree.

Second chair leaders who want to grow toward a partnership own their mistakes.

If you’re really honest and look into the depths of your soul, you may realize that you’re feeling lonely in the second chair.

When you are truly known by people who understand you and your role, they can offer a safe place for you to share your deepest difficulties and anxieties.

I don’t think that you can afford to not invest in life-giving relationships that will overcome loneliness. The cost of living in isolation and not thriving is just too high.