Review

Irving, Justin A., *Healthy Leadership for Thriving Organizations.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023. 242 pp. ISBN 9781540964809

By Grant, McMillan, MA

Justin A. Irving, Professor of Christian Leadership at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and coauthor of *Leadership in Christian Perspective*, presents a compelling guide for Christian leaders in his latest book, *Healthy Leadership for Thriving Organizations*. This work addresses the critical role of organizational culture and places the responsibility for it firmly on leaders. As Peter Drucker famously stated, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," and Irving echoes this sentiment throughout the book, underscoring that leaders shape the environments in which their teams operate.

The book's subtitle, "Creating contexts where people flourish," signals its target audience: leaders of large teams, board members, students, and aspiring leaders. Irving structures the content in four parts, beginning with a survey of pressing concerns faced by executive leaders, highlighting issues that have persisted for decades, now compounded by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The survey results are reviewed throughout the book and give its message more credence. *Healthy Leadership for Thriving Organizations* is divided into four parts.

Part One lays a foundation for wisdom in organizational leadership, where Irving shares insights gathered from hundreds of leaders across various sectors. He draws from biblical, theological, and scholarly sources to explore the concept of leading so that followers can flourish—a topic gaining traction in social science and leadership studies. However, the book lacks a clear definition of human flourishing, which could hinder readers' understanding of the desired outcome of this leadership. Without a framework for measuring or tracking this concept, the book assumes that following the subsequent principles will automatically foster a flourishing environment. This is a large assumption. That said, the beginning of chapter two is dedicated to an attempt at understanding what is human flourishing. Here, Irving highlights authors such as Jonathan Pennington who notes that the concept of "shalom" in the Old Testament and Jesus' use of the word "blessed" in the Sermon on the Mount are related to this concept of flourishing. He then leans on the ancient Greek concept of "the good life" and pushes it further to include becoming the person God created us to be, while also being in a right relationship with God and

our neighbour. But Irving never strays far from putting the onus back on leaders to create the context for human flourishing, whatever he means by it.

Part Two emphasizes the importance of the leader's character, covering aspects like self-leadership, emotional intelligence, and self-care. This section can be summed up by saying healthy leaders understand that their character and actions earn and preserve trust from followers. The last section of Part Two focuses on practical matters such as time management and delegation and offers practical tips. For example, on page 50, Irving says, "In humility, we must embrace the reality that this organization is not about me. We are stewards of that which belongs to another.... With sobriety, we need to feel the weight of the stewardship responsibility entrusted to us." These are good things for leaders to keep in mind, but this section seems underdeveloped given the depth of research available on these topics.

In Part Three, Irving shifts focus to the significance of teams and their collective impact on organizational success. He wisely avoids falling into the trap of the "Great Man" theory, instead recognizing that while leaders play a vital role, organizations are not solely defined by them. It is this section that misses the opportunity to study boards and their influence on leaders and the contexts that Irving is so interested in discussing. However, he does not miss out on the importance of care and cultivation of team members. Some comments from his survey research are very helpful here: "Get the heart of the people. Build healthy and ethical relationships.... Leading with love is essentially a relational practice." Wise words indeed. And it is here that Irving shows some of his value as an academic. He is well aware of the debate among leadership theorists regarding whether it is better to focus on relationship or results, as though they are mutually exclusive. Contra that debate, he quotes a *Harvard Business Review* article about the importance of connecting before leading.

Part Four delves into the essential leadership priorities for cultivating thriving organizations. Here Irving highlights the importance of effective communication and alignment with the organization's mission, values, and beliefs. This section may be the book's most crucial, as it addresses how weak communication can lead to organizational dysfunction. Given his emphasis on creating contexts where people can flourish, good communication can be an antidote to toxic workplaces and church cultures.

The final chapter of the book is on change and creating a thriving future. This section seemed like a literature review of change management theories. John Kotter's eight stages of effective change is outlined. Kurt Lewin's three step process

(unfreeze, change, refreeze) gets a paragraph. And probably because Irving has listened to more than a few evangelical preachers, he offers his own change theory in an acrostic that spells (yes, you guessed it) CHANGE. The book ends rather abruptly with two pages of recommendations and reflections on change. One might have expected a conclusion, but the reader will be left looking for one elsewhere.

Irving's book predominantly centers on executive leaders, mirroring traditional leadership research to the 1980s. Contenporary studies highlight that leadership is influenced by various factors beyond the leader, including followers, organizational structures, and external environments. While it is important to hold leaders accountable for organizational culture, recognizing and addressing some additional influences would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the contexts which promote human flourishing.

Given the intended readership, a more thorough exploration of the role of boards in shaping organizational culture would enrich the discussion. This area deserves further research, as boards, especially in churches, can significantly influence leadership effectiveness and organizational health.

Overall, *Healthy Leadership for Thriving Organizations* offers valuable insights for Christian leaders. It is solidly biblical, well researched, practical, and real. It could benefit from deeper exploration of certain concepts and broader influences on organizational culture, and it would be a better book if it ended with a conclusion. These are small concerns in light of the wisdom and practical knowledge in this book.

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