

# **Leading from the Sandbox: How to Develop, Empower and Release High-Impact Ministry Teams**

T.J. Addington  
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Built upon his previous work in *High Impact Church Boards*, T. J. Addington provides a thoughtful and practical book addressed to those wishing to develop, empower, and release effective ministry teams. Addington introduces his discussion of teams with the observation that while most people actually do want to be a part of teams, they often have encountered unhealthy and negative teams in the past. These negative experiences where individuals faced teams in name only tend to keep people from encountering the real thing. Addington wrote this book to expose people to the power of effective teams and to help people understand how healthy, collegial, missional, and passionate teams are developed, empowered, and released for ministry.

*Leading from the Sandbox* is a practical “how to” manual for developing high-impact teams which utilizes the metaphor of the sandbox for unpacking its practical team concepts. Addington talks about the sandbox as the place where creativity and fun are synonymous, and argues that ministry should similarly be both fun and challenging, using the best of our gifts and creativity. In Addington’s words, “Leading a

team is all about understanding the gifting of those we lead and then releasing them to ‘play’ to their strengths, literally to play in their work” (15).

Structurally, each chapter begins with a helpful summary, and each chapter ends with “H. I. (High Impact) Questions for Team Discussion.” In addition to the H. I. Questions for Team Discussion, each chapter also includes a variety of other stand-out sections including H. I. Moments, H. I. Definitions, and H. I. Best Practice. Each of these H. I. sections, along with the chapter summary, provides literary structures which help the reader quickly identify key points in each of Addington’s chapters. For leaders who are busy in ministry and service, an easy-to-read format like this is uniquely valuable. The structure of *Leading from the Sandbox* is both accessible and user-friendly, and is a very real selling point for busy ministry practitioners.

Building upon his description of what high impact teams are and what they are not in chapter one, Addington goes on to focus on the importance of team clarity in chapter two. Addington argues that an organization’s clarity around their mission, guiding principles, central ministry focus, and preferred culture is vital for creating a context within which high-impact teams may flourish and align with the broader organization. Simply put, Addington argues that the sandbox metaphor and model becomes a “simple tool that allows for alignment around ministry philosophy rather than methods” (33).

Addington moves on in the book to engage the importance of defining organizational culture by focusing on five common dysfunctions (control, bureaucracy, ambiguity, professional ministry, and mistrust) and by presenting associated strategies

for addressing these dysfunctions. Once cultural dysfunctions are addressed and a leader has constructed their organizational sandbox of mission, guiding principles, central ministry focus, and preferred culture, it is time to start developing high-impact teams.

Addington see building high-impact teams in several vital steps: first, by focusing on healthy team leaders (chapter five); second by getting the right people on the teams (chapter six); third by focusing on intentional rather than accidental living as teams; and fourth by releasing and empowering team members through mentoring and coaching (chapter seven). Addington concludes with a final chapter focused on the critical nature of organizational leadership transitions through developing a solid leadership “bench” where leaders are grooming the next generation of leaders for the leadership transitions to come.

Addington has been with the Evangelical Free Church of America as the Senior Vice President and Executive Director of ReachGlobal since 2004. This context for ministry leadership and service has created significant pathways for “playing” in the sandbox of ministry leadership, and provides the basis for Addington’s writing in *Leading from the Sandbox*. Addington engages the topic in a manner that brings practical experience and general organizational insight together for providing actionable “how to” lessons for leaders of teams.

On the whole, I believe the book accomplishes what it sets out to do. As a reviewer, I would have liked to see at least two areas or emphases developed further. First, while the book provides a message that is consistent with general Christian values

and practices (e.g., Addington's call for leaders to attend to their personal spiritual, family, emotional, relational, and professional lives), there is little in the book that grounds the value of teams in a biblical or theological argument. While the pragmatic arguments Addington provides are helpful, providing a rich biblical-theological grounding to his argument for teams would be appreciated.

Second, as evidenced by the six endnotes provided at the end of the book, Addington provides virtually no interaction with what others have said and written on the topic of teams. As a scholar-practitioner, this reviewer appreciates books that evidence awareness of other resources and insights that have been shared on the topic down through the years. I appreciate the academic humility that is manifested when authors spend time engaging their own thoughts in light of what others have shared. In Addington's defense, he makes it clear that he is not writing an academic book but rather a highly practical book. At the end of the day, his emphasis on practical how-to insights probably benefited from avoiding an overly footnoted approach, and I can appreciate why Addington selected the approach he did.

For ministry leaders who desire to raise the value and presence of teams in their organizations, Addington's *Leading from the Sandbox* is a helpful contribution that adds down-to-earth value and practical insight for their journey with teams. Addington notes, "Having done ministry on my own, on teams that were teams in name only, on some massively dysfunctional teams, and finally on a healthy, collegial, missional, and passionate team, I will never willingly go back to doing ministry by myself – or on an unhealthy team" (13). For those wishing to end at a similar destination of working with

healthy teams, *Leading from the Sandbox* is a thoughtful and helpful guide for moving leaders toward a place of developing, empowering, and releasing high-impact and healthy ministry teams.