



# 9

## Leadership According to Proverbs 31

As a leader, would you like to move above the level of mediocrity and stretch toward perfection in your work life? If so, this chapter is must read for you. In it, you will find advice from a collection of 22 verses that tell you how to behave and how to work so you might move closer to perfection as a leader.

### Introduction to the Passage

Proverbs 31:10–32 contains 22 verses, each beginning in the Hebrew with a successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet (an acrostic). Although Cohen (1946) ascribes the author's name, Lemuel as a code name for Solomon, translating Lemuel as meaning: towards God, most writers, including Gibson (1987), Farmer (1991), and Ironside (1908) believe that the writer was a king named Lemuel.

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Verses 10 through 32 are words of advice from the mother of a king, or perhaps a young prince, who is looking for a wife. Throughout the Book of Proverbs, we see authors talking about the dangers of evil women. This passage of Proverbs is refreshing in its positive approach to women. Its placement in the passage is important since Hebrew teachings always ended with an important lesson.

Cohen (1946) points out that these 22 verses were recited from memory in the Jewish home on the Sabbath eve, thus setting a high standard for the Jewish wife and the young women of the household who aspired to attain this level of perfection. It also set a standard for the young men of the household who received constant instruction about the type of wife they were to seek. Now let me show you how this has a bearing on the workplace. Consider, the impact on United States organizations if the human resource departments, all leaders, and all hiring supervisors, repeated the qualities of a perfect leader for the firm once each week. Would we not strive to live up to these high ideals and strive to hire new leaders that fit our concept of perfection?

Although the acrostic form of writing makes it easier to memorize the verses, it causes a literary problem of message construction because the first letter of the first word of each verse must fit the acrostic structure. Thus, we find the author of these 22 verses skipping from subject to subject. I encourage you to read the whole of Proverbs 31:10–21 and then focus on how the messages are grouped into the following categories: (a) an introduction to the passage; (b) relation to the workplace; (c) relation to self in the workplace; (d) relation to employees in the workplace; (e) relation to superiors in the workplace; and (f) relation to rewards in the workplace.

In case you're wondering, here's why you should study a passage on the ideal wife to understand the perfect leader. Several authors on Proverbs refer to the wife as a leader and a caretaker of the home (Toy 1904; Aitken 1986; Cohen 1946). Rylaarsdam (1964) adds to this understanding by pointing out that the wife, like many leaders, did not have ownership rights in the household. Thus, her labors could not increase her wealth. If you want a solid definition of a hardworking overseer, this is what you're looking for. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at the clear and powerful correlations.

Proverbs 31:10, “An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels”. (NAS)

The first verse of this passage implies that the senior leader of the organization recognizes that a leader of virtue and skill is invaluable. Note that virtue, from the Hebrew word *chayil*, has a broader depiction than just being morally righteous. The word also refers to ability, efficiency, and wealth (Hamel 1992). It is rare to find a leader who not only has integrity, but also has the skills to perform the job, and a track record of efficient leadership that produces wealth for the organization. Knowing this helps to further justify the value in finding a perfect leader (wife).

This collection of 22 verses does not address the feminine characteristics of a wife. Thus, they have a greater interpretation of the area of leadership in general. The writer of this passage may not have downplayed the feminine characteristics on purpose, but rather simply emphasized other characteristics.

## Relation to the Workplace

Proverbs 31:

12–14 “She does him good and not evil All the days of her life”. (NAS)

16 “She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard”. (NAS)

18 “She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night”. (NAS)

19 “She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hands grasp the spindle”. (NAS)

21 “She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet”. (NAS)

27 “She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness”. (NAS)

We can better understand the relationship of the perfect leader to the workplace through verses 12–14, 16, 18, 19, 21, and 27. Verse 12 shows a leader

who actively seeks the highest quality goods and services to use in the workplace, examining all potential services for best quality and price. The implication from this verse is that there is ample quantity to assure that other employees have plenty of material with which to work. This is not grudging work for the leader since the second part of verse 13 indicates that she works from a spirit of willingness, not of coercion (Cohen 1946; Farmer 1991; Plaut 1961; Ironside 1908).

Verse 14 further demonstrates the resourcefulness of the leader (wife) by comparing her with merchant ships. Throughout the ages, cultures have benefited from trading resources and goods not available in their local area. Likewise, a leader should go outside to discover new trends, ideas, and products to bring back to the organization, thus, emphasizing the importance of continuous improvement through training and development.

Verse 16 teaches us that the perfect leader considers buying assets that will expand the value of the organization (household). These wise purchases result in remaining funds. Within an organization, a leader strives to accomplish the same result, spending less than budgeted and using the remainder to expand the value of the department. (This presumes that the more-senior leaders allow this behavior.)

Verse 16 defines the leader's role; she considers a field, which represents an idea that is barren without strategic plans. Then, the leader purchases the field or "buys into" an idea and generates detailed plans to move the idea into reality. Then, with profit or remaining funds (from a well-managed budget), the leader produces a vineyard that becomes fertile ground that yields fruit (more profit) in its season. This is similar to verse 24, which indicates that the perfect leader (wife) not only produces what the organization (household) needs, but also strives to produce an excess that she could sell in the marketplace for profit. She would then sow this increase back into the organization (Cohen 1946; Farmer 1991; Bridges 1846; Collins 1980).

While the previous verses address the practical behavior of leaders, verses 18 and 19 refer to three traits of the perfect leader. The leader knows that what she does is good; she exhibits confidence in the work that she produces and puts any spare time into industrious endeavors. Here, the word "perceive" in Hebrew means, "to taste or eat" (Hamel 1992).

This implies a great responsibility to leaders who should believe and support their products or services to the extent that they themselves are willing to use them.

The latter part of verse 18 refers to the practice of keeping a lamp lit all night. Cohen (1946) posits that the Bedouin saying: “He sleeps in darkness” refers to a condition of poverty. Plaut (1961) takes a different view by commenting that keeping a lamp lit all night might indicate that the leader (wife) works long hours, or that she lives in a state of prosperity, for only the prosperous could afford to keep a lamp lit during the night. Regarding the parable of the Ten Virgins, this verse, as well as verse 21, indicates the practice of preparation. Leaders should have contingency or crisis plans to ensure the organization’s welfare and productivity during unexpected or extraordinary events.

Verse 27 indicates that the perfect leader (wife) places the workplace first in need and desire. This character trait does not mean that the leader goes without important goods and services for herself. Several other verses imply that she profits from her labor. This indicates that the perfect leader (wife) knows who she is in relation to the workplace.

## Relation to Self in the Workplace

Proverbs 31:

17 “She girds [fn]herself with strength And makes her arms strong”. (NAS)

20–22 “She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet. She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple”. (NAS)

25–26 “Strength and dignity are her clothing, And she smiles at the future. She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue”. (NAS)

30–31 “Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, But a woman who [fn]fears the LORD, she shall be praised. Give her the [fn]product of her hands, And let her works praise her in the gates”. (NAS)

Verses 17, 20–22, 25–26, and 30–31 provide insight as to how the perfect leader sees herself and relates to herself in the workplace. Verse 17 refers to the perfect leader (wife) girding her loins. Writers differ on the meaning of this. Collins (1980) says that this verse indicates that she is not adverse to moving beyond her femininity and getting dirty in her work. Hubbard (1989) refers to the use of the metaphor ‘girding,’ to describe the intensity with which she labors, for “to gird the loins” in Hebrew means to get to fight or to work hard. Cohen (1946) believes that she pulled her skirt up from the back and tucked it into her girdle (belt) to ensure that her movements were unrestricted, allowing her to participate with the employees in hard work. Cohen’s comment implies that the perfect leader (wife) is not afraid to engage in work that is usually handled by lower level employees. This is similar to the phrase ‘rolling up your sleeves and joining the work.’ We see a similar reference to women of status who willingly perform hard work in Genesis as when Rebekah willingly brought water to the travelers and to their camels.

The Proverbs 31 leader is not only humble and versatile enough to work alongside those of lesser rank in the organization but, as verse 20 indicates, the perfect leader (wife) also meets the needs of the poor. This may imply the poor within or outside the organization. The perfect leader would not withhold resources from other departments that needed them, even if they could not afford them. In the Hebrew, we translate “hand” from the Hebrew *Yad* (Strong’s word 3027) as open-handed – palm up. This shows the liberality with which she gives to the poor (Cohen 1946).

In this set of verses, the servant heart of the Proverbs 31 leader begins to unfold. Verses 21–22 show a relationship between the perfect leader (wife) and her employees. She provides for those whom she oversees before she provides for herself. McKane (1970) states that the reference to scarlet, fine linen, and purple demonstrates the leader’s interest in quality.

By serving, the leader feels fulfilled, and as verse 25 demonstrates, the perfect leader (wife) finds self-esteem in her performance in the workplace. Cohen (1946) says that the reference to ‘laughing at the time to come’ implies that she is quite comfortable with whatever may occur in

the future because of her foresight in making provision. This preparedness improves her feeling of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Verse 26 reveals that when the perfect leader (wife) speaks, her words are clear and full of wisdom. What she says shows kindness in her instruction (Alden 1983). She does not participate in biting gossip or speak evil of anyone. Scripture has several references about women not speaking in public, similar to what many junior leaders must follow. This verse shows that when someone, like the perfect leader (wife), speaks with such wisdom and kindness, she is always welcome in conversation and finds many listeners.

Ironside (1908) reveals the secret of the perfect leader's success in verses 30–31. Her success and comfort are that she fears the Lord and holds Him in high esteem. Ironside goes on to say that although others may take pride in their beauty and winning words, the perfect leader rests in true character that comes from God. Hubbard (1989) helps us understand that the perfect leader (wife) relies on inner strength, not outward cosmetics that belie what is underneath the surface. Some leaders use charm or vanity to bluff their way up the corporate ladder.

A scriptural principle indicates that whatever one hides will not remain hidden, but will be exposed. In the long run, others discover that leaders who rely on these temporal qualities lack the substance and genuine insight needed to manage an organization. We do not cognitively learn this quality. It comes from the character developed in a relationship with God. It is this character that sets the stage for how the perfect leader relates to employees. It is noteworthy that the Book of Proverbs begins and ends with a reference to the importance of having a fear of the Lord (Farmer 1991).

## Relation to Employees in the Workplace

Proverbs 31:

15 “She rises also while it is still night And gives food to her household and portions to her maidens”. (NAS)

21 “She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet”. (NAS)

27–29 “She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying: ‘Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all’”. (NAS)

Verses 15, 21, 27, 28 give us some insight into how the perfect leader (wife) relates to employees. Verse 15 indicates that she arrives before other employees and prepares the workplace if needed, so that all work can begin on time with the desired raw materials. The perfect leader ensures that all employees have what they need to do a good day’s work. This implies both resources for the job and compensation for the day’s labor.

The latter part of verse 21 and the first part of verse 27 indicate that the perfect leader (wife) provides only the best for her employees.

Because of what she does, verse 28 indicates that employees (the verse refers to children) regard her kindly. “Her children rise up and call her blessed.” A positive relationship with employees results in employees thinking highly of her. This implies a probable willingness to work hard for her. The perfect leader (wife) should model this behavior in her relationships with her superiors.

## Relation to Superiors in the Workplace

Proverbs 31:

10–12 “An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life”. (NAS)

23 “Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land”. (NAS)

29 “Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all”. (NAS)

Verses 10–12, 23, and 29 reveal the two-way relationship characteristics between the perfect leader (wife) and her superiors (husband). Verses



10 through 12 provide a statement of value, as recognized by the superior leader. Alden (1983) implies that the use of the word trust in verse 11 might imply that she inspires full confidence from those above her. Her superiors would repay this trust by giving her full control of what she did. The latter part of verse 11 says that the superior has “no lack of gain.” Different writers offer different interpretations of this verse. Alden (1983) says that the superior has no unmet needs because of the efforts of the perfect leader (wife). Cohen says that the Hebrew word for “gain” implies the spoils of war, meaning that the superior gained what was not originally his. Bridges (1846) offers a different view by showing that the perfect leader (wife) provides so well that the superior (husband) does not need to go away from the organization (home) in order “to enrich himself with the soldier’s spoils” (p. 621). These interpretations show the perfect wife/leader as providing such an abundance that the superior has no unmet needs.

Verse 23 indicates that as a result of the perfect leader’s work quality, the superior’s peers highly regard him or her. The reference in this verse to the city gates implies that the superior is so confident in what the perfect leader (wife) does, that the superior can dedicate time to activities of a higher order. This permits the organization to gain the most from both the perfect leader and her superior’s labors.

Verse 29 shows the value of the perfect leader to the superior. The reference to daughters is a Hebrew language method of referring to all women rather than the literal daughter (Cohen 1946). Valuing someone translates into rewards.

## Relation to Rewards in the Workplace

Proverbs 31:

16 “She considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard”. (NAS)

22 “She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple”. (NAS)

28–29 “Her children rise up and bless her; her husband also, and he praises her, saying: “Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all”. (NAS)

31 “Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates”. (NAS)

Verses 16, 22, 28–29, and 31 give insight as to the types of rewards that the perfect leader (wife) receives and how she handles them. Verse 16 indicates that the excess she generates is first put back into the organization to make it stronger. Verse 22 shows that she provides herself with the best only after the organization and her employees have what they need (Cohen 1946; Bridges 1846; Alden 1983).

Verses 28–29 indicate that both her subordinates and her superiors recognize her value and contribution and tell others how good she is. Verse 31 indicates that she gains praise from the marketplace. Earlier, verses 11 and 23 showed that the superior gained from the perfect leader. Now, in verse 31, the superior does what is necessary for the world to see who truly was responsible for the organization’s well-being. What a wonderful reward.

## Conclusion

From these 22 verses, we see the perfect leader as one who places the needs of others before her own, yet she is not ashamed to participate in the returns when there is excess for distribution. We see a leader who strives to perform so well that her peers esteem the superior because of her excellent work. We see a leader who considers the needs of the less fortunate in the organization and provides what she can to help them. We see a leader who is always willing to “roll up her sleeves” so to speak, to allow her to get in and work alongside her employees, without regard for the level of work at hand.

The driving force of this leader is that she has a fear of the Lord. She strives to do all that she can for her organization to make the

organization and its employees the best that they can be. In summary, the Proverbs 31 leader:

- Does good—v. 12
- Seeks to find materials—v. 13
- Willingly works—v. 13
- Brings in valuable outside resources—v. 14
- Rises early to work—v. 15
- Provides for the workers—v. 15
- Considers purchases, ideas, and solutions—v. 16
- Girds with strength—v. 17
- Perceives, believes in the organization—v. 18
- Stretches out—v. 19
- Holds (stability)—v. 19
- Extends himself or herself—v. 20
- Reaches out—v. 20
- Is not afraid (unprepared)—v. 21
- Makes (willing to roll-up his sleeves)—v. 22
- Supplies—v. 24
- Rejoices—v. 25
- Speaks with wisdom—v. 26
- Watches over the workers—v. 27
- Doesn't partake in idleness—v. 27
- FEARS THE LORD!—v. 30

## Selah

If you would like to become a Proverbs 31 leader, consider which of these behaviors you currently exhibit and then strive to improve them. If there are behaviors listed here that you currently do not exhibit, begin now to change. It is never too late to begin to become a Proverbs 31 leader.

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