

The Personal Touch: Tony Dungy on Relational Leadership

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*Of all the men in sports who love Jesus, few command as much respect as Tony Dungy. His achievements on the field, as the first African-American head coach to win a Super Bowl, have often been overshadowed by his achievements off it. His unique leadership abilities have been a frequent topic of discussion, inspiring all those around him and guiding many to future success. New Man had a chance to talk with Dungy recently about his new book, *The Mentor Leader*, and to hear some of his ideas and perspectives about being a Christian leader.*

New Man: You have always been spoken of with respect by people in sports, even by those you wouldn't expect it from, like radio DJs. Why is that?

Tony Dungy: I don't really know for sure. It's God's favor, I guess. But I think that in all the different environments I've been in, whether it's the NFL or television or whatever, I've been able to get involved in causes and tried to do the right thing. I think that's something people always appreciate—when you're trying to do the right thing and helping the communities where you live.

New Man: Why did you want to write another book? Did you see a specific need for this?

Dungy: I guess in talking to people in a lot of different venues, from the commissioner of the NFL to church leaders to people who are in other businesses, I think there's a vacuum for this type of leadership. Since I've retired from head coaching, people have asked me a lot about building teams and building organizations and how you go about doing it. They ask how we did it in Indianapolis, because people noticed that we seemed to have a different way of doing it. The way I did it was biblically based. I would take principles from the Bible that seemed very common sense to me, but they were well-received in all sorts of different arenas. So the book was a way for me to explain Christian leadership to a secular world, because they may not be hearing this from another source.

New Man: How is a mentor leader different from what we normally think of as a leader?

Dungy: A lot of people have said that when they see the title for the book, *Mentor Leader*, they think the two words don't go together. People think of mentors as people who are there for someone, who take a personal interest in your life, spend time with you and get to know you. Then they view a leader as someone who is more detached, who is above everyone. Those two ideas don't go together in a lot of people's minds. But when I was a leader in the NFL, my idea was that you're always taking people's interests to heart. I would always try to get to know people, to learn what makes them tick, to learn what they could do and how they could make the entire group better. I think you're better off as a group by developing that bond with people you're leading.

In our society, that's often a foreign concept. I remember when I first started as head coach of the Buccaneers, people kept telling me: "You're going to have to change. You're not going to be able to remain as close to the players. You need to put some distance between you and them." But I never saw it that way.

New Man: It's funny, you still hear people saying that your style of coaching doesn't work even after the Indianapolis championship. But obviously it worked out well.

Dungy: Definitely. I believed in getting to know each player and developing relationships. By doing that, we're going to develop loyalty toward each other that will be able to withstand any type of pressure, and that's how we'll move along down the road. When you develop that trust, people work well together because they're trusting you to make the right decisions and point them in the right direction. I would explain that to owners when I was taking job interviews, and a lot of football people didn't think it would work. But I was convinced it would work anywhere, because it's biblically based. Now we've seen some other coaches who have taken similar philosophies have success.

New Man: When you look at the principles you're talking about, specifically pouring your life into people who will then do the same to others, it reminds me a lot of the way Jesus led the disciples.

Dungy: Absolutely, I think that's why it has proven the test of time. I believe that Christ was the best example of a leader that the world has ever seen, and so you look at how he did it and then incorporate that into your life, and it has to work. And it will work anywhere. We don't just have to model Christ when we're in church, because these principles carry over to any venue we want to put them in.

New Man: One of the other things you focus on in the book is being aware of the exponential impact you have on others as a leader.

Dungy: Yeah, that's the thing to me that's so great—is that you never know the extent of your reach. You don't always see just how far it goes. Mike Tomlin [the head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers] is a classic example for me. I spent a year with Mike and gave him the opportunity to get into coaching in the National Football League. He did a great job and continued to grow and develop. Later on, he ended up coaching a young man named Scott Frost. Scott now coaches in college. The way the circumstances worked out, Scott ended up coming to our house and recruiting our son for football at his school. When he was talking to us about himself and his coaching style, I could hear Mike Tomlin's voice coming through him. It was amazing.

I wrote Mike an email after that and said, "You probably don't understand how much of an impact you've had on this man." I'm sure he knew that he had an impact as a football coach, but he also affected Scott's principles and his worldview even years later. Mike's impact went beyond the immediate results he could see. That's something we always have to be aware of in our interactions with those around us.

New Man: Is there a specific area of leadership you'd like to see men in the church take on more?

Dungy: I think we have to not be afraid to keep our faith in other areas of our lives. A lot of men think this style is only how we run our church, but we can take these principles and apply them to our families, jobs and neighborhoods. The principles of our faith should be evident in all the areas of our life.

New Man: What would you say to guys out there who may not feel like they are leaders?

Dungy: Everyone is a leader at some point in their lives. That was always my message to our team. You can't always look to the head coach or the quarterback to be a leader. We have to get leadership from

everyone. Everyone has to help everyone else on the team grow so that we can be a success. Even a second-year player is looked up to by the first-year players. I told them, "You've been through things they haven't, and you can make a difference to them."

That's the way it is in every person's life. No one can be immune. Whether you know it or not, you're leading someone and having an impact on their life, so make sure you're leading them in a positive direction. It's not just the president of the company or the head coach that's a leader. It's everyone.

New Man: For men who want to do more as a mentor leader, are there any specific ministries you recommend they get involved in?

Dungy: There are so many great charities and ministries starving for help, I'm not specifically championing one. I do a lot of work with the Big Brothers and Big Sisters organization. That's a classic example of a great group that has a huge waiting list of kids who need mentoring. I've also done a lot with the Boys and Girls Club over the years.

But it doesn't have to be anything formal like that. I remember when I was about 12 or 13, there was a guy who was five years older than me who had a big influence on me. It wasn't an organized thing, but he would spend time with me, and it was a really positive thing. It's amazing what taking an interest in someone can do. It could be as simple as spending time with one of your neighbors and telling them: "Hey, you've really got a talent in this area. Have you ever thought about doing this or this?" You could have an impact that goes beyond what you can see.

To learn more about Tony Dungy, find his book or get involved with his ministries, visit www.coachdungy.com.