

Brian Houston: 'If You Can't Prove It, Don't Say It'

Now that my friend Brian Houston's new book *Live Love Lead* is out and being read by plenty of leaders, I thought it was time to ask him some questions. As founding Pastor of Hillsong Church, with locations in at least 15 major cities around the world, his leadership principles have impacted thousands of pastors and ministry leaders. Plus, Hillsong Music is the most popular worship label worldwide, and the feature length motion picture *Let Hope Rise*—about their band Hillsong United—is in the works. So we had a lot to talk about:

Phil Cooke: Hillsong seems to be taking off like a rocket these days. You're continuing to open churches in major cities around the world, the conferences are growing, Hillsong music is exploding, and the feature film *Let Hope Rise* will be released soon. With everything that's going on, why did you decide to write the new book right now?

Brian Houston: God's grace never ceases to amaze me. Last year I turned 60 and celebrated 40 years of ministry—and it was at that point (after a bit of coaxing from family, friends and other leaders) that I realized I needed to document some of my own journey, in an effort to share and encourage others.

The sustained blessing and growth of Hillsong globally is something that has no human explanation, and I often get overwhelmed by God's faithfulness, so all I can say is, "To God be the glory ..." But even though the Hillsong story is a miraculous one, it hasn't come without its 'bumps in the road', sacrifice and hardship. I have wanted to write this book for a long, long time but the practicality of actually finding the time to put my heart and soul into this project hasn't always been easy amongst building a growing church and other leadership responsibilities. It was in the past twelve

months that all the pieces came together beautifully—including a fantastic relationship in the lead up with the publishers and team behind the scenes, pulling it all together ... the timing now feels perfect.

Phil: Why is “leadership” so important in the church today?

Brian: I don’t think there’s ever been a time when leadership has not been important in the church! Everything of significance is achieved through leadership and I believe that the church today needs selfless leaders who are building generationally, bringing out the very best in others, and are committed to raising up the people around them to be all God has called them to be. We need more courageous pioneers who dare to be innovative and build for the future.

The world is full of unpredictability and inconsistency. I believe people on a spiritual journey aren’t looking for a ‘superstar;’ they’re looking for someone who’s consistent across all areas of life because life is overrun with inconsistencies. Don’t get me wrong—leaders aren’t perfect—but godly leadership is all about giving people something to aspire to, and a vision worth believing in. The impact of leadership to make or break a church, an organization or even a home is profound, and I believe the huge majority of people want to be led and respond to leadership. Leaders are visionaries and the Bible says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish; but happy is he who keeps the teaching” (Prov. 29:18).

Phil: The book doesn’t mince words or hide anything, including the challenge of dealing with terrible revelations about your own father. How important is it for leaders in today’s culture to be transparent?

Brian: I was determined in writing this book to be vulnerable and talk about the highs and the lows of life. The thesis of the book is to live a big life on a sometimes-difficult path,

through a narrow gate (Jesus) to a glorious future. On my own personal journey of leadership, I have encountered some difficult times, both privately and publicly, and this book gives some insight into that. It is my belief that our transparency speaks to people in a much deeper way than our success does—there is something very attractive about authenticity.

Strong leadership involves having the courage to let your guard down and be authentic. People see beyond false ‘fronts’ and excuses. The temptation when life’s path becomes difficult can be to isolate yourself and protect yourself with an ‘everything is just fine, I’m the leader, people mustn’t know about our struggles’ type of attitude. But the truth is, transparency with the right heart and motives can be a learning experience not only for yourself, but for those you lead. Of course, there is a fine line between transparency and being pitiful.

I have led a church for thirty-two years. There is nobody who can lead that long without confronting the various seasons of life and leadership. It’s strength to admit a weakness but it’s a weakness not to admit our mistakes. To see the fruit of wisdom in our lives, we need to have the spirit of a listener and a heart that is open to correction; transparency is a pathway to that.

Image is important, but don’t be an image-maker—be a credibility builder and start with your own.

Phil: What’s the greatest failure you see out there among Christian leaders today?

Brian: I guess I don’t sit around and think about people’s failures—and I have no time for leaders who publicly criticize other leaders, or leaders who have a harsh view of God and lead people from that perspective. I believe that if you create an angry or critical world, that anger and criticism

will end up devouring you.

There is a real difference between leading people and 'lording' over people. Strong leadership is not domineering, and doesn't make demands of the people they lead. Instead, developing a leadership culture that produces growth, loyalty, and creativity in others—allowing them to develop their own leadership gifting's and serve the kingdom in a unique way—is what creates longevity in both your leadership and the people you lead.

Phil: As any leader would who's pushing the boundaries and stretching people, you've had your share of critics. What would you say to other leaders about dealing with criticism?

Brian: Anyone who is doing anything significant will draw criticism and accolades—but it's a mistake to be moved by either. In my book, *Live Love Lead*, I speak about how in Australia we talk about cutting down the "tall poppy"—obviously referring to a flower that stands taller than all the others. It is an expression reserved for people who are doing more than most, or achieving unprecedented success. Often politicians, artists, entertainers and business people are scrutinized, and while this critical tendency can be used unfairly to take someone down a notch, it also reminds us not to think too highly of ourselves or assume all the credit.

Of course the advent of social media gives everyone a platform and I have learned that reacting to critics means you are only elevating their platform.

Three things I believe leaders need to do with criticism:

1. *Ask yourself "What can I learn and what do I need to change?"*
2. *Don't be over-sensitive or ruled by the opinions of others. There are people whose counsel is valuable and needed and also a world of opinions that need to be ignored.*

3. Remember, life is not a popularity contest and there are almost always a lot more people who love you and respect you than there are those who want to tear you down.

And continually remind yourself what the Word of God says about you. How you respond to criticism is an indication of how well you have anchored your soul in the Word of God and His promises over your life and calling. Listen to wise counsel, seek God's Word and train your heart to hear from the Holy Spirit—let the words that speak loudest in your life be His.

Phil: A movement like Hillsong is complex, but if you could name a few reasons why it's grown so much and connected with today's culture in such a significant way, what would those reasons be?

Brian: Years ago I wrote about the church that I envisioned pastoring. Part of that statement was "I see a church that loves God, loves people and loves life: youthful in spirit, generous at heart, faith-filled in confession, loving in nature and inclusive in expression."

Many years later, we haven't simply tried to BUILD that culture, we have done everything we can to BE that culture. We have intentionally poured into—through teaching and example—a congregation and leaders that carry that heart and vision; people that ARE youthful, generous, faith-filled, loving and inclusive. Many people can look at the connection that Hillsong makes with 'culture' and put it down to the lights, sound and loud music. But my firm belief is that relevance is not about the clothes you wear and the type of music you sing at your church. True relevance is measured by the distance between what you say and what you do. If your actions and lifestyle fail to line up with what you say, preach, and believe, then your message becomes irrelevant.

Hillsong Church has never tried to develop ourselves to 'fit

in' to culture, we have simply tried to BE the culture—placing emphasis on the things that we are uniquely called to be: A church with a message of WELCOME HOME, A church with a healthy SOUND, A church with Bible-based teaching that speaks to peoples' Mondays and not just their Sundays, and a church with ENDLESS VISION—both for people's own lives and for the life and ministry of the church. This, coupled with the grace of God, has seen us connect in amazing ways with people from all cultures, cities and walks of life.

Phil: Many people assume a church that's this attractive to 20-something's must be shallow in it's teaching. And yet, in the book's section called "A Narrow Gate" you're very explicit about preaching the name of Jesus and not holding back when it comes to the gospel. Do you believe the era of "pastor as motivational speaker" is over, and are people looking for deeper teaching today?

Brian: I always tell the young pastors, "If you can't prove it, don't say it. The platform is not for your opinions; it is God's Word that matters. Every Scripture reference must be in context and within the tenure of the Scriptures. People come to church to be inspired and encouraged, but they don't come for a motivational talk."

I can't speak for anyone but my own church, but at Hillsong Church—as long as I am the Senior Pastor—we will always be a BIBLE-based church with messages centered on the Scriptures. There is a need for every different preaching style across a spectrum of churches. We need both charismatic communicators along with deep thinkers and teachers—but regardless if you are the best communicator in the world, if your message fails to line up with the Word of God, or isn't deeply rooted in Scripture, then you have misunderstood what the platform is for.

Phil: What's the most important thing you want people to walk away with after reading the book?

Brian: *We serve a big God.* Jesus walked a difficult path on earth—and he taught that the way to God is a narrow gate—but he still lived a very BIG life. Narrow does not have to mean tight!

A life of leadership and serving the kingdom of God is a life of learning. It's about taking risks, making mistakes and loving people. Who you influence is as important as how you influence. Leadership is not a title! It is about living fully, loving authentically and leading boldly. It is about a consistency, character and a commitment to stay the course.

Live Love Lead is my leadership journey—a collection of lessons learnt, personal victories and persistent valleys. It's not complicated, but it is tried and proven. My prayer is that people will discover wisdom and strength from the powerful biblical truths and tested leadership principles within its pages. That people will be inspired to unlock personal vision for the future—and most importantly, that people will discover a Saviour that is crazy about them, and has incomparable and unique plans and purposes for their lives.

Phil: What's next for Brian Houston? What are you most excited about for the future?

Brian: I am 61 years old and loving this stage of life. I believe the first half of your leadership journey is about vision—blazing a trail. And the second half is all about equipping and empowering, about fathering and making room for other leaders. I am living in that second half and more committed than ever to setting up the next generation to win and be all God has called them to be. I've just launched a new website which is all about 'Let's Talk Church' and 'Let's Talk Leadership'—an avenue to discuss the realities of life, love and leadership, and to learn from one another as we are each on individual journeys.

The Bible (in Acts 2) says, “...old men dream dreams.” Well, I don’t see myself as or feel ‘old’, but I am certainly still dreaming! I believe that our church has so much opportunity ahead of us, and the best days are still ahead. I am an unashamed advocate for the local church and I want to continue to champion the cause of local churches everywhere—through our conferences, resources, and worship.

Immediately in front of me is a book tour, which gets me so excited. We are taking the message of Live Love Lead on the road and having ‘Hillsong Nights’ with the best of our Hillsong Worship team in cities all over the United States. I’m so keen to meet with leaders, speak the Word of God into people’s lives and leave room for the Holy Spirit to minister to each and every person coming.

Phil Cooke *is a media consultant focused mainly on the Christian market, as well as a vocal critic of contemporary American and American-influenced Christian culture. Click [here](#) to visit his website.*