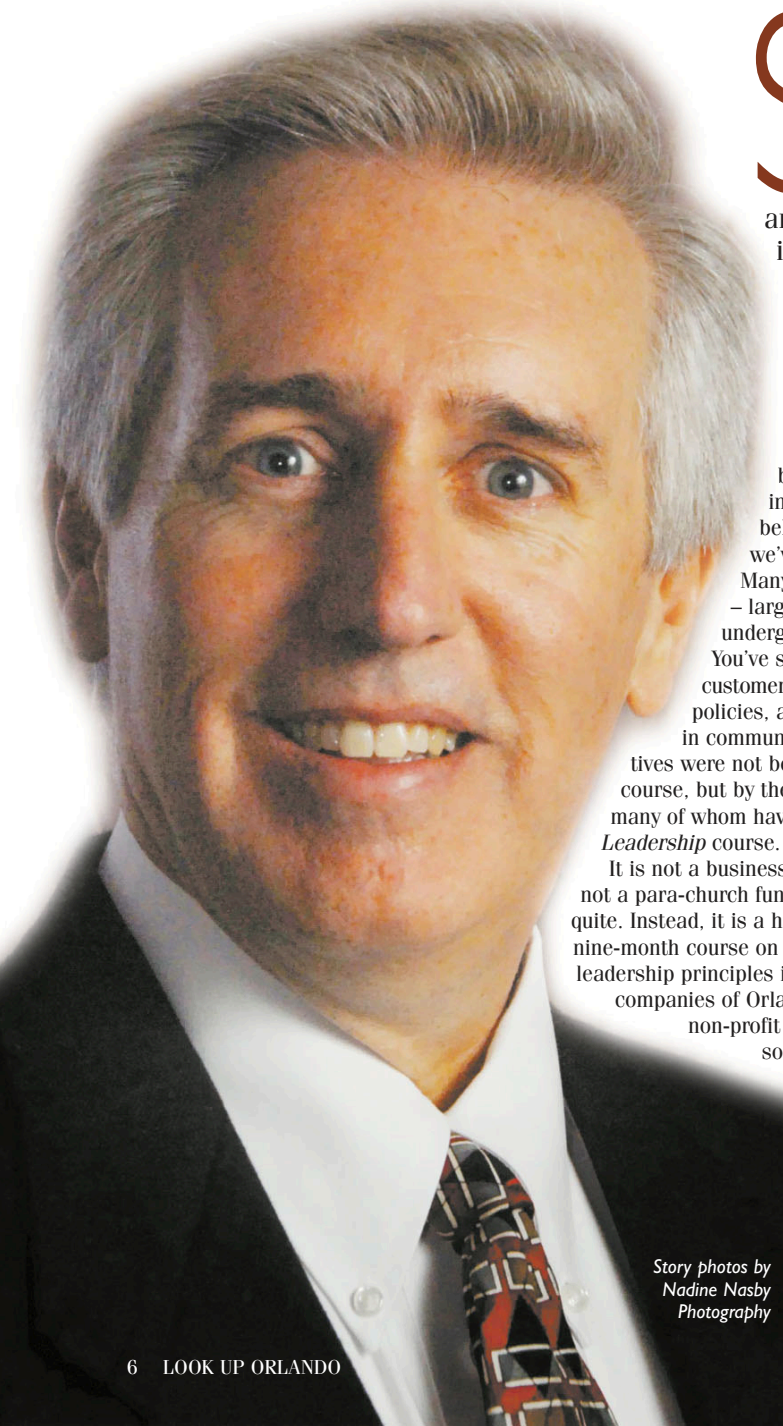


Steve French

Making Life (and Business) Work By Rob Swanson



Steve French and I stood on the 14th floor of the CNL Center that looks straight down Orange Avenue. The view was spectacular; displaying the phenomenal growth of Orlando in the last decade. While I saw new buildings mingled in with the old; Steve French saw *people* – hundreds of *Lifework Leadership* alumni, and thousands upon thousands of those unknowingly impacted by Orlando's premier leadership program.

It sounds like a Secret Society...except the meetings are not clandestine, anyone can participate, and the incredible outreach of the alumni is entirely benevolent. Still, their involvement is often behind the scenes, though we've all experienced it.

Many of the city's businesses – large and small – have undergone transformations.

You've seen it as better customer service, kinder business policies, and greater involvement in community efforts. These initiatives were not begun by companies, of course, but by the people running them, many of whom have taken the *Lifework Leadership* course.

It is not a business seminar...exactly. It is not a para-church function...at least, not quite. Instead, it is a happy fusion of both; a nine-month course on bringing Christian leadership principles into the lives and companies of Orlando's business and non-profit leaders. Nine months sounds like a huge

commitment, and it is, but not really in the aspect of time. The class meets one morning a month for three-quarters of a year. If you're wondering why they just don't make it a week long retreat, Steve

French has a good answer: "Transformation is not short; it doesn't happen over a weekend or even a month." This "transformation" Steve speaks of lasts a lifetime, reaching far beyond the class. Participants put a single lesson to practice throughout the month, allowing the biblical truths to settle in and transform their lives. Before learning the next lesson, they share their month's experience with the class.

Steve is the president of *Lifework Leadership*. He is what we all want to be when we grow up: fit, trim, neatly pressed, and with an inner vitality that could make over-alls and flannel look professional. He is the opposite of the stereotype normally attached to his New Jersey roots. "I'm from the same town *The Sopranos* filmed in, though maybe you don't want to put that in the article..." Oh, but I do, because it contrasts so sharply with who Steve really is. He is warm, personable, and completely transparent; the opposite of Tony Soprano. "I don't even have the accent. People laugh at me when I try to put one on."

Just as well; who Steve really models himself after has a much better reputation. "It's amazing really. Most Christians bank their life on Jesus, but not many have banked their leadership on Him. In other words, we're willing to follow the basic principles of how Jesus lived life, but have never thought through the fact that Jesus modeled leadership, too. In fact, Jesus could have done the dying on the cross in a weekend, but intentionally he took three years to model how to develop a leadership team, how to pass the baton properly, and ultimately to develop an organization that will literally change the world and be lasting!" Steve's enthusiasm is infectious. He's quick to point out that he didn't originate the idea, though he's well-versed in *Lifework Leadership's* history.

Fifteen years ago, Senator Bill Armstrong

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(Colorado), resigned from the Senate, stepping down as Chairman of the Republican Policy Committee. After realizing the futility of trying to legislate change, he gathered Christian businessmen and Christian thinkers such as Steven Reinemund of PepsiCo, and Os Guinness, author of *The Call*, and dozens of others with the question "what can we do to make *change* occur, to make *transformation* occur?"

That question spun off several ideas, one of which was a 9-month business leader's course that helps men and women in the marketplace integrate their faith into the working world. Orlando was chosen as the place to make it happen, and with that location came the original name with a clever acronym: *Greater Orlando Leadership Foundation – G.O.L.F.* Now that the "pilot phase" has proven successful, it's time for other cities to start their own programs. As Steve points out, "unless we confine those cities to Omaha, Oklahoma, and Oviedo, we were going to have to change the name." *Lifework Leadership* captures their mission well.

The format of *Lifework* is effective and innovative. The class doesn't cherry-pick principles to apply in business; it digs into the scripture and examines the leadership development cycle. "Why did Jesus do that then? What was His purpose in this?" The wisdom of this approach is obvious: Jesus developed an organization that would weather the worst of storms – persecution, cultural change, even scandal! – and it not only survived, it's *thrived*. The fact that every one of Jesus' disciples came from the marketplace doesn't escape Steve and his team. If Jesus poured His every effort into developing such people, what a calling to work in! Each class presents an aspect of Jesus' leadership development, then a local businessman of note discusses how that aspect has impacted him. Next up, a national speaker such as an Os Guinness or a Gordon MacDonald gives their perspective. Participants leave impacted, motivated, and energized!

The success of *Lifework* has been phenomenal. People in the upper echelons of major Orlando companies are transforming not just themselves and their families, but the companies they worked for. Nor are businessmen the only participants. Government leaders and non-profit leaders find themselves and their efforts tremendously affected. Seven years ago it became obvious that to magnify their impact, the founders of *Lifework* (then *G.O.L.F.*) would need to find a full-time leader.

That's where Steve French came into the picture. Dozens of candidates presented themselves, all of whom had local roots and had been through the program. All except Steve. He was a long shot, but when his wife, Sharon, read the job description, she looked at him and said, "Steve, if this is not you, I want to meet the person who it is!" Indeed, Steve's background made him uniquely suited for this role.

While Steve doesn't have local roots, he does have a national perspective, necessary for growing *Lifework Leadership* across the country. Born and raised in New Jersey, Steve crossed the country to attend Biola University in California, and finished up at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts with a degree in Religious Education. His Master's degree was achieved at Wheaton Graduate School in Illinois, where he stayed to work in youth ministry at Willow Creek Community Church, famed for its theatrical productions as well as the gospel.

Steve took the creativity he enjoyed at Willow Creek and moved back to New Jersey, where he founded Meadowbrook Church, and ran the startup church for ten years. As anyone involved with church planting knows, leadership development is the backbone of a successful fellowship. After a decade of service to his church, Steve began to feel a calling to shift his focus from *what he did to who he did it with*. When he looked at the "who" rather than the "what," he realized those he loved most – his parents and in-laws – had retired to Orlando. Being faithful to that new calling, despite having no idea what he would do in the Sunshine State, Steve moved his wife and two children to the City Beautiful, setting the stage for the next big life change he was to experience.

"For eighteen months I did odd jobs, turning down any offers that would take me away from the significant people in my life. It was a

struggle, but I was determined to hang onto the 'who' and hang on dearly. Like so many men, my identity had been wrapped up in what I did rather than who I was; working odd jobs scraped a lot of that off. I asked God to let me hold onto leadership development, changing men and women from the inside out."

That's when Steve met a few of the founders of *G.O.L.F.* Larry Kreider encouraged Steve to apply for the leadership opening, along with twenty-two other "more qualified" candidates. Reluctant at first, Steve followed through with his application. "The process was amazing. The sense of affirmation through every interview...well, we've been here seven years now." Clearly, the right choice was made. It has been a providential seven years.

One-hundred-and-fifty alumni matriculated in *G.O.L.F.*'s first seven years, and the number is now up to six-hundred *Lifeworkers*. That transforms into pure benefit to Orlando.

Never was this more evident than in 2004, when Orlando was lashed by three hurricanes. For almost any other city, that would have been an ongoing national story that would play on the front page of every newspaper for months – much like the New Orleans disaster. And yet it didn't. A week after the hurricanes the only news stories were positive, praising the heroic efforts of individuals, the local government, and non-profit organizations.

How does this relate to *Lifework*? Consider this: Currently, 89% of *Lifework* alumni are serving the city in some manner through non-profit organizations. Seventy-three of Orlando's non-profit centers have *Lifework* alumni serving on the board. For a solid understanding of the significance of these numbers, remember that non-profit leaders are often large on vision and small in strategic thinking, not to mention often being cash poor. By partnering with transformed business leaders, the organization becomes amazingly stable, flexible and responsive, able to respond to daily crisis and the ability to scale up to handle sudden disaster.



Local *Lifework Leadership* Alumni

"We actually run into a common problem at *Lifework Leadership*. The participating businesspeople are so moved by the desire to serve the people of Orlando they will many times question whether they should get out of business and start a ministry," Steve tells me. "We have to remind them that their business is a ministry!"

As Steve walked me out to my car after the interview, he slipped me a couple DVD's about *Lifework Leadership*. "You can watch these if you think it will help your article." They did help me with the article, but even more with my life. Those short introductory videos clarified so many of the questions I've been struggling with in my own profession. I'll be saving my pennies to take the class. You might want to too.

For more information about *Lifework Leadership*, visit them on the web at www.lifeworkleadership.org. **LJ**