

Weekly Thoughts



Weekly Thoughts for Office Devotions

Space for Grace
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Oh no, not staff prayers...

Staff prayers should be a time of spiritual refreshment, an opportunity to connect with ourselves, each other and with God. But too often they feel like a burden, sapping precious time and energy from our 'real' work. If you have ever been in such a situation or are just looking for new ideas, then this booklet may be for you.

People have found the regular Weekly Thoughts from the Space for Grace learning group really helpful in making office prayers more interesting. It has helped them establish a healthier spiritual rhythm at work. So we picked out 52 of these Weekly Thoughts for this booklet. They reflect a diversity of church traditions as well as cultural contexts.

Authors come from all over the world - Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. We all share a commitment to integrating faith in the workplace, creating space for grace in an inclusive and energising way, irrespective of denomination.

Use this booklet in whatever way works best for you – on your own; in your teams, in your whole organisation. Be creative. Ask people to share their own experiences. Look together for Bible passages that reflect the message. Make up your own application questions. But most of all be courageous to apply whatever you discuss. Words need action to bring life and change.

/Space for Grace

WEEK 1

Prayer at work

A couple of weeks ago I came across two articles in esteemed business papers which reminded me how seriously some of the world's largest companies are taking the practice of meditation. In the Harvard Business Review blog network, Peter Bregman wrote a piece entitled: 'If you are too busy to meditate, read this'. Again in the Financial Times David Gelles wrote about General Mills, the huge US company behind Cheerios cereal and Haagen-Dazs ice cream explaining:

“Open the right door on a Tuesday morning and you might find a few dozen team leaders and executives meditating together on cushions, steeling themselves for the work week ahead. Enter a conference room a few hours later that afternoon and witness 50 senior executives standing on one leg in the tree pose as they practise yoga.”

Some Christian organisations do not take their spirituality as seriously at work as these secular businesses do. In our well-meaning efforts to avoid inflicting an exclusive, 'churchy' religiosity on those around us, we may have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. These businesses are not bringing in spiritual practices because of any faith base, but because they have learnt that this is what makes them more productive, more refreshed, creative, and able to make better and wiser decisions.

This week:

What could you do to bring in the refreshing resources of your faith into your workplace - in a creative, energising and inclusive way?

WEEK 2

If you are too busy, you may be lost

A busy person is not so much active as lost.

I was taken aback when I read these words by Ruth Haley Barton. After all being busy is a badge of honour in many of our cultures. If we are not busy, then we think we must be wasting our time.

Yet being too busy may not be God's will for our lives. It may indeed reveal that we are lost - not really sure what God wants us to do. So we end up doing too much. We may find it hard to say no when people ask us to do things. We may need to overcome the insidious thought that 'only I can do this well enough'.

All of us have human limits. We cannot serve everyone. We cannot increase our time. None of us has super human powers to avoid the need for rest. We all need to make quality time

for our relationship with God. A recent survey of 20,000 Christians worldwide revealed that 65% rushed from task to task in a way that interferes with their relationship with God.

Even Jesus did not respond to every need. Luke 5:16 describes how he often took himself off on his own to lonely places, even when people were looking for him to heal them.

This week:

Where do we need to say 'no'?

How can we make more quality time for God?

WEEK 3

Listening to God at work

I was talking with the international director of a large faith-based organisation about discernment (recognising and responding to the presence and activity of God in a situation). She caught me off-guard when she said, *'Well I trust we would never do anything like that in our organisation'*.

A lot of people are very fearful of trying to bring discernment into management decisions. It feels like we are not valuing the human wisdom and common sense that God has already given us. For many they have been emotionally and spiritually damaged by people in power inflicting their interpretation of God's will onto a situation in a manipulative and controlling way.

But our own intellect may not be enough in making decisions. We do not know everything

about our own organisation. None of us knows the future. Our own rational thoughts may well be clouded by our own interests and agendas, whether we are aware of this or not. As Ruth Haley Barton warns *'When we set out to do good, but carry out our attempts without the discipline of attending to our own stuff which lies beneath and opening ourselves up to God's presence, evil is always close at hand'*.

I get worried when I read in Isaiah 55:8 that God declares *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."* We may need to make more opportunities to listen to God about organisational issues at work, like one CEO of a large Christian NGO in UK who takes two hours every Friday lunchtime just listening and praying.

This week:

What decisions are coming up for you at work over the next month where you need God's direction and leading?

What will you do to try and create the space to hear from God?

WEEK 4

Identity in a fishbowl

We're in the midst of a restructuring process. It is scary, yet also interesting and challenging. As we are a small organisation, I thought I knew my colleagues quite well. But when my department was merged with another, I questioned what I really knew about them.

In my new unit, we realised early that we needed external help to facilitate the merger. For ten years, we had each developed our own ways of working and team culture. Now somewhat reluctantly, we found ourselves thrown together. The consultant helped us talk about issues we had never mentioned before. I found out new things about each of my colleagues, including my old team. I even learned new things about myself.

I found the fish bowl exercise particularly useful. Each of the former teams sat in the

middle and were encouraged to “talk about our culture and work methods”, while the other team was listening in silence seated in a circle around us. Then the teams switched places, and the team in the middle talked about what they had heard while listening to the other team. Then the first team got back in the middle to reflect on what the other team had heard as they listened.

This exercise and the dialogues that followed gave new insights into what we had been as teams and what we wanted to be as a unit. It reminded me of Jesus asking: “*And you, who do you say I am?*” In the uncertainty of change, Jesus invited his closest followers to reflect on what others said, and what they themselves believed.

This week:

Take the time to listen carefully to your colleagues and find out something new about them. Make sure you also share something new about yourself.

WEEK 5

Discussing the undiscussable

There are always undiscussable issues in any organization. There are usually ‘elephants in the room’. We shy away from naming them. We steer clear of brutal facts. It would seem disloyal to bring them up. We fear if we bring up such issues, we will be labelled a rebel and may even face reprisals.

A few weeks back I was asked to facilitate two meetings of over 250 leaders from my church. Rather than dodge the big issues, I believed it was vital to put them on the table – even to the point of addressing the taboo subject of succession from the founding pastor (in his presence). This was not easy. I think it only worked because I managed to:

1. Get the top leadership on my side – If you do not get visible support from the leadership,

they will be a strong resistance and render the whole task useless.

2. Create an atmosphere of liberty – People will only open up in a ‘safe space’ when there is a spirit of freedom in the place. *“I felt the leadership wanted to hear this and did not feel I would be penalized”*, one excited leader commented after the meeting.

3. Use Diplomatic Honesty – Jesus certainly did not shy away from speaking the truth. But he always did it with grace and compassion.

4. Ask the right questions – Framing the right questions around issues that often remain undiscussed requires discernment and wisdom (and even bouncing off leaders in advance). Some of the questions that worked those days for me were:

What would you do differently?

What are the game changers here?

What prohibits us from progressing forward?

This week:

In which work situations do we need to discuss the undiscussables?

What questions might energise change in these situations?

WEEK 6

The widow's mite

The other day I came across an ancient coin in an antique shop. It dated from Pontius Pilate's time and became known as the 'widow's mite' – in reference to the incident in Mark 12: 41-44:

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.

A year ago, I found myself a few thousand miles away in Indonesia facilitating a small leprosy

NGO do some strategic planning. As I listened to the gory descriptions from Jhon, one of the field workers, of the care he gives to those disabled by leprosy I remembered the widow's mite. I realised rather painfully that like the rich people in the temple, my giving to development was highly visible – travelling across the world, staying in hotels, facilitating events, writing books. I had slipped into thinking how important my contribution was. Yet I am only giving out of my wealth and then being well-rewarded for doing so.

Writing books or even facilitating events is not 'real' development work. Development does not take place in offices or behind leaders' desks or even in computers. Change happens away from the spotlight, in poor communities, on the streets... where love and compassion can be very costly.

This week:

Who in your organisation is doing the real work, alongside the people you exist to serve?

How can you better support and encourage them this week?

WEEK 7

Taking responsibility to change

Change only occurs when someone somewhere takes responsibility for a situation. Kurt Lewin, the father of organisational change theories, pointed out more than fifty years ago that the first stage in change involved ‘induced anxiety or guilt – a realisation that I am in some way responsible’. Instead of externalising blame onto other people, they realise that they are in some way responsible and that they can do something about it.

Perhaps then I should not be so surprised that the exercise that has had the biggest impact on the organisations I work with is simply when I stop and ask people to answer:

How have I contributed to this situation which I complain about?

I tend to send people away on their own to prayerfully listen to God about how they have contributed to a situation. In dealing with hurt and frustrations it is important to get people out of a ‘blamestorming’ attitude. It allows God to bring conviction, not people to condemn each other. I have often found that changing people’s physical environment helps in this, suggesting they listen to God while going for a walk or sitting outside. The key is to create a safe space to consider the question in a meaningful way.

This week:

If we look at our own lives, where are we blaming others for a situation?

Let’s stop and ask ourselves: ‘How have I contributed to this?’

WEEK 8

Cheap or treasured words

I have been thinking a lot about the numbing niceness in many Christian organisations. Such niceness gets in the way of giving honest feedback. We also compromise our honesty when we inflate numbers ('hundreds came forward'... 'thousands were reached') and make exaggerated claims on God's behalf. The NGO world is also full of broken promises. We present unrealistic proposals claiming that we will transform people's lives forever in just three years – and then we wonder why we so often fail... Consultant reports are sometimes unsubstantiated opinion disguised as objective assessment. Our worlds are awash with cheap words.

The Bible talks about honesty a lot. Matthew 5:37 says: *"Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no' – anything else comes from the evil one"*. And my least favourite story in the Bible

is the one about Ananias and Sapphira. I don't like to think about it too much. Whatever else it says, it shows me that we need to treat what we say with great care and respect - if not indeed fear and trepidation.

This week:

In the proposals, reports and emails we write; the feedback we give; the suggestions we make; the arguments we put forward, how can we treasure our words more?

WEEK 9

Humble confidence

I sometimes struggle with working with humility and confidence. A few weeks ago, I was making some suggestions to my co-facilitator as we were doing some joint planning for an event. After we finished, he asked me to reflect on my posture while making my contributions. I realised that I had done it quite hesitantly. I was trying not to be presumptuous with my thoughts, and this had affected my confidence to make a contribution in this particular work situation. It dawned on me that sometimes, because I do not want to appear over-bearing, I deny others the gifts that I have to offer.

In Matthew 5: 13 Jesus challenges us to be the salt of the world. A good meal needs just enough salt. As Christians if we are 'too much salt', we can ruin a situation and cause a lot of harm, while if we are 'too little salt', we will not

make any difference. We might as well not be there. I realised that one of the ways I lose my saltiness is by holding back on what I have to contribute.

Humility involves recognising and boldly using the gifts that God has given us, in the places where he puts us. To be the right amount of salt in team situations, and as an Organisational Development practitioner, I need to work with both humility and confidence. If one overwhelms the other then I lose the beauty and power of who God has created me to be.

This week:

To take the opportunities that God is giving me, where do I need to be both confident and humble?

What do I need to strengthen or let go of so that I can be the 'right amount of salt'?

WEEK 10

Start with the small things

A friend came to visit me in my office. She is newly employed as an administrator at the parish level of one of our Swedish churches. We talked about our children and things in general for a while. Then she said suddenly:

“It took me a while to figure out what was wrong with my new job. I have just realised that people around me look stuck. They do not expect results. They do not even want to develop and change. We are just supposed to do the things we do and that is it. What should I do? I want to change this!”

Now this is a healthy start, I thought. Someone eager to lift the curtains, get rid of the dust and open the window to change. But as I probed with some questions it became clearer that things were not that easy. The organisation is tired to their bones of top-down driven

change-processes. I really started to feel for my friend, as she was now embarking on this wonderfully difficult journey of being an internal change agent. It will be exhausting as well as exciting.

So, what could I say to this? Well, I did not say much, mostly I listened. My only advice in the end was to try to establish new ways of doing things in the areas of work where she had control. To model a different practice, even in small ways, can be an example to the organisation and its management. It will take her time to build trust and grow into her mission. As we parted, we agreed to keep in touch on this. People trying to free organisations from their stuck situations need a lot of support.

This week:

How can you inspire change through the way you do the small things?

What can you do to encourage the internal change agents that you know?

WEEK 11

Forgiveness at the heart of change

Organisations are messy places. They are full of people with different interests, opinions, needs, personalities and priorities. The inherent tension that fuels creativity often degenerates into political manoeuvring and conflict. In any organisation, whether secular or Christian, forgiveness is an essential component of change. As leaders and change agents we are called to be 'stewards of God's grace' in our workplaces (1 Peter 4:10).

A few years ago a friend told me the story about how he was facilitating a very intensive process with a large secular NGO. In the middle of the workshop a significant breakthrough occurred and 'fingers that were pointing at each other, suddenly started pointing at themselves and healing and forgiveness took place'. But at the end of the workshop, rather than celebrate this progress,

his young colleague pushed the client still further. He said that he felt that there was still unfinished business. There was a loaded silence. He challenged them: *'I think it is so important that you should not even allow this weekend to go by before you have talked through the issues and forgiven each other.'*

On the Monday the Director emailed them, describing how people had spontaneously got together over the weekend and talked through things they had kept buried for some time. In the days that followed they continued to receive e-mails from staff, many of which said: *'It feels as if I am working in a different organisation; I have hope to continue.'*

This week:

How can I promote forgiveness in my workplace?

WEEK 12

Restoring grace

So often recently, over coffee and meals, I have been listening to leaders expressing their disappointments. Many had felt led by God to start new projects, ministries and programmes, but barriers were springing up all over the place. The visions they were trying to be faithful to were not being realised. Instead they felt under attack. Leaders were left perplexed and dismayed. Had they not heard God? Where was God in their struggles?

I felt frustrated on their behalf. But as I read Acts 23, I found myself deeply challenged. I pictured the Apostle Paul sitting in chains in the Jerusalem jail. I wondered whether he was feeling the same perplexity and dismay as these leaders I have been listening to. And then God came to him in that cell... Yet not to rescue him and remove him from the circumstances. No, God just reminded Paul

that he was called to Rome. God came to reiterate His promise and to challenge Paul to place his hope in God's provision, not in his circumstances.

We too are called to spend much of our time and efforts in the space in-between our heart's knowledge of God's promises and the reality on the ground. May we take courage, nurture hope and let God unfold promises in every circumstance.

This week:

Are there any God-inspired visions or truths about God's provision in your work that you feel you have lost?

Are there any areas of your life where you could invite God to restore your hope this week?

WEEK 13

When tempted to give up

Determination has never been my strongest suit. I enjoy being thought of as 'laid-back', but this means by nature I look for the easy way out. I have never needed to reach the summit of a mountain climb. I tend to give up quite easily. Perhaps this is why I am so drawn to the contrasting writings of Dag Hammarskjöld, the Swedish diplomat who became Secretary General to the UN. In his book *Markings*, he writes:

Life yields only to the conqueror. Never accept what can be gained by giving in.

Life only demands from you the strength you possess.

Only one feat is possible – not to have run away.

When the morning's freshness has been replaced by the weariness of midday, when leg muscles quiver under the strain, the climb seems endless and suddenly nothing will go quite as you wish... it is then you must not hesitate.

Never for the sake of peace and quiet deny your own experience or conviction.

I often challenge myself with these quotes. I have to work hard to resist the temptation to give up and take the easy way out when situations are not as I had hoped.

This week:

Where are you tempted to give up at the moment?

What is God's teaching you in that situation?

WEEK 14

Greed in disguise

Greed is good at disguise. It can masquerade as success or even blessing...

People used to talk a lot about 'small is beautiful'. But nowadays bigger always seems to be better. Some agencies (and even churches) may have become 'fiscally mesmerised' by ever increasing income targets. A desire for growth becomes the main driver for decision-making. We use size to define success. We are really proud of growth. We justify this fixation on the basis that growth means we can reach more people and change more lives. But there may be a shadow side to this growth objective. Our motives may not be wholly pure. Our desire for growth may be influenced by greed.

Greed is not just something out there in the organisations, it affects us all as

individuals. As a consultant, I am deeply uncomfortable when clients ask 'What do you charge?' I know I have to earn an income, but how much is enough? I may only charge 'the market rate', but my daily fee may be much more than a local salary for a month or even two... Am I really worth that amount of money? Or has greed altered my perspective?

Greed is all around us. It is not just in richer countries. We need to be on a constant look-out.

This week:

What disguises does greed wear in your life?

How can you fight against it?

WEEK 15

The perfect structure - a costly obsession

We are mistaken if we imagine there is a perfect structure. Yet so many insist that if only we got the structure right then all would be well. In one organisation I have worked with, they have changed their structure three times in the last two years and are about to implement a fourth one! But there is no such thing as the perfect structure. How we choose to divide up work in an organisation will always be full of compromises and challenges. The ways in which organisations behave tend to be deeper than just the structure. So even if we change the structure the same issues soon resurface, simply in a different place.

This obsession with structure is costly. Every time a new structure is implemented, staff have to shift roles, learn new skills and relate to a different set of people in a different way. This is emotionally and mentally exhausting.

It frequently drains vital energy away from the actual mission of the organisation. Organisations who are restructuring often become so inward looking that they lose focus on who they are here to serve. They are demotivating places to work.

Perhaps as leaders and consultants we are complicit in this. We want to appear able to fix problems. And structure is perhaps one of the most visible solutions. Perhaps we should turn our attention away from simplistic structural solutions and deal with the more fundamental and complex issues of people.

This week:

Let's not think of the people merely as a workforce to conform to whatever changes appear right to us. Instead, let's consider how we invest in people, helping them to realise their strengths and to move towards realising their potential.

WEEK 16

What motivates you?

At a facilitation course this summer, someone asked me *“What motivates you to do what you do?”* I quickly respond: *“God’s love for me motivates me to do what I do”*. My answer came easily. Perhaps too easily.

I remembered this answer when I returned from a long holiday recently. Instead of coming back refreshed, I quickly felt drained and uninspired as I met the same frustrating work situations I had left behind. I was also reminded of my easy answer in a number of conversations over the past few weeks with friends who work in churches. Too many are thinking of leaving, discouraged by the people they work with and the circumstances around them.

As I pondered I realised that if I rely on people around me to dictate how I respond to the call

that God has given me, I will be continually in the state of confusion. God’s love for me is greater and unchangeable. I realised I should not run away from what I was called to do simply because of the external circumstances or other people. I need to persevere. This may not automatically change the situations that I’m facing in my work. But it does change my response. It reconnects me with the source of my motivation and inspiration – God’s true and perfect love for me.

This week:

Reflect on the question, “What motivates you?”

Invite God to speak to your heart.

WEEK 17

People of peace

Like many of you my work has taken me away from home for varying amounts of time - a privilege but not without challenge. A while back a close friend began to pray for 'people of peace to cross my path.' I have followed this example and been overwhelmed by the way this prayer has been answered time and again.

Have you ever looked back on a piece of work and thought, "That person made all the difference?" So often, I have found that there are one or two individuals I meet during a consultancy that seemingly have been put in that organisation for such a time as this. They are courageous individuals who continue to allow themselves to be affected by the Holy Spirit for communal good; men and women who often have quiet ministries to their teams; people who are committed to the nudging of

the Holy Spirit more than vision statements, strategic goals or expert consultants.

Jesus encouraged his followers to faithfully look for the individuals who were already partnering with the Holy Spirit in their own communities and directed them to pay attention (Luke 10).

This week:

Pray for 'people of peace' to cross your path?

Pray for them to have discernment in listening to God for their organisations, courage in acting when necessary and influence in the larger life of the organisation.

WEEK 18

Jealous Jonah

I have always been captivated by Jonah's story. How despite being a prophet he ran away from God's call; survived a violent storm; was miraculously saved by a great fish; went on to give God's message to the people of Nineveh about their wickedness; saw how they repented and yet was left angry and upset...

I'm still amazed by the part about the miraculous rescue in a fish, but as I grow older I think I understand more of Jonah's angry response to God's abounding mercy and forgiveness. He was jealous – jealous that these wicked people could share in God's blessings.

Are we ever jealous in our own organisations? I remember one particular project managers' meeting. We were discussing a need to increase local salary levels. Some expats

present refused. They argued *“But this will mean that some even earn more than we do”*. They might have professed a belief that people are equal in the sight of God, but their behaviour didn't show it. It made me think how quick we are to claim God's blessing for ourselves, but how we often jealously deny God's blessing to others.

This week:

Who in our organisations should we be blessing?

Whose change and success should we be celebrating?

WEEK 19

Radical grace

“At our core we truly believe in the concept of radical grace”. This was not the usual ‘rights’ response I was expecting from the Christian NGO I was working with earlier this week. They went on to give quite uncomfortable examples of putting radical grace into practice – of not just forgiving and forgetting, but going further to restore the person. It sounded a bit like Philip Yancey’s term, ‘the scandal of grace’.

It reminded me of an article I read in the Times newspaper last year which was analysing the transformed fortunes of the world-beating English cricket team. Under the headline “Winning culture a matter of trust and forgiveness” it described how so many team members had been regularly forgiven rather than penalised - “allowing player after player to concentrate on wider issues than self”. It is not that there are no longer

any sanctions for poor performance, but the default option has radically changed to trust and forgiveness.

So forgiveness is not just for a Sunday in church or even Christian workplaces. It is something that all organisations need, whether commercial businesses or sporting teams. Forgiveness is something that cannot only change individual lives, but can also make a tangible difference to organisational performance.

This week:

What would radical grace look like in your organisation?

WEEK 20

Love in conflict

Why are personnel conflicts so difficult to handle in a Christian organisation? A former colleague often said how much easier it was to deal with conflict when he was working with a secular organisation. Some cultures make it even harder to handle conflict positively. I was born and raised in the Philippines and have always been taught to overlook mistakes and avoid conflict as much as possible.

I was recently part of an organisational assessment process. Some real issues of conflict were surfacing. An individual spoke up, saying, *'We should stop talking about this now and simply love one another'*. The others assented saying, *'Yes, this is what God commands us'*.

While loving one another is what Jesus requires of us, how is love best expressed in a

situation of conflict? How many conflicts have gone unresolved because we don't talk about it? Do we too easily sweep conflict under the rug using the excuse of love? Sometimes it is more loving to try to resolve conflicts rather than pretend they are not there.

In my experience, when a conflict is not properly resolved or understood, it comes back and hunts us down. It is not easy to talk about conflict, but in the long run it may be good for us. If we do not share our feelings of hurt, frustrations and disappointment with others, bitterness and hatred can set in. But when we deal with conflict in Christ-like manner, allowing grace to overflow, we will experience peace and reconciliation. It is important for each of us to be able to confess, to repent and to be reconciled rather than to keep unspoken conflict inside us. In this way, we can be healed and restored; we can learn from the conflict. Dealing with conflict enables us to become more healthy and effective as organisations.

This week:

Are there conflicts in your organisation that need to be resolved?

How will you resolve them?

WEEK 21

Getting the best from your people

It is easy to say “our people are our greatest asset”. But as Jim Collins points out, it is only the right people who are your greatest asset. And even if you have the ‘right people on the bus’, are you making the most from your greatest asset?

A global survey by London Business School reported that only 21% of staff are fully engaged at their workplace – the rest may be there physically, but have not brought the best of their energies, ideas, commitment and creativity to work.

In the lively and thought-provoking booklet ‘The Happy Manifesto’ (do download it free and read it) Henry Stewart describes how he often asks people to:

Think of an example when you worked at your best, when you were really proud of what you achieved?

He finds out that it is invariably when people felt trusted and able to find their own way to the objective. It may be that we get over-involved in the detail of what people do. In the name of management, we quench their creativity. We inadvertently encourage them to dis-engage...

This week:

Think of the people you work with - do you give them the same level of trust that enabled you to work at your best?

What would be different if you did?

WEEK 22

Receiving feedback

Feedback from colleagues is one of the most important systems that exists to build up any organisation. Peer reviews give the opportunity to express appreciation for the contribution and unique gift of a colleague and to assist his or her professional and personal development. While this practice is significant for individual growth and organisational effectiveness, it is always a hard process.

In my experiences within Christian organisations, positive feedback is often insincere and shallow. In some places, we say nice things, but without much thought. Conversely in other cultures people do not want to elevate a colleague too high. Everywhere we seem to avoid negative feedback as much as possible – certainly not face-to-face feedback. If we have to give

criticism, we tend to write something from the safety of hiding behind a computer screen or sometimes we just do it behind the person's back. We fear that any negative feedback will be received with hostility. We do not want to make enemies so we pull back and avoid potential conflict.

As Christians and people who care about our colleagues, I think it is important to give feedback. It helps our colleagues to be aware of their abilities and 'dis'abilities. It also encourages them to multiply the good behaviours and improve in the areas that they need to work on. Giving feedback should never be motivated by frustration, jealousy, nor a desire to put people down and lift ourselves up. We need to give feedback in the right spirit - out of deep love for our colleagues.

This week:

Who do you need to give feedback to?

What are your deep-down motives?

How ready are you to receive feedback from your colleagues?

WEEK 23

The speed of trust

One of the great things about being able to give and receive honest feedback is that it builds trust. Trust is one of the most valuable organisational commodities. It is not an optional extra, nor a soft, airy fairy ideal. Trust is at the core of how well any organisation functions. As Steven MR Covey clearly outlines in his book of the same name, we operate only at the 'speed of trust' (2006).

Low trust slows everything down. If there is no trust, words and decision are negatively interpreted. There is suspicion, between people and organisations, not synergy. It leads to increasing bureaucracy, duplication of effort, political manoeuvring and disengagement.

Do you trust your boss? – the answer to this one question apparently is more predictive of

team and organisational performance than any other question.

As we go to work, (as leader, consultant, NGO staff) our top responsibility is to build trust. Trust is one of the most powerful forms of motivation and inspiration. People want to be trusted. They respond to trust. Covey defines leadership as “getting results in a way that inspires trust”.

So what can we do to build trust as leaders? The fastest way to build trust is to make and keep commitments. We judge ourselves by our intentions, we judge other people by their behaviour. Good words have their place, but what you do has far greater impact than what you say.

Do not be naïve or gullible – combine high propensity to trust with rigorous analysis. Look at your systems. Are they set up for the 3% who can't be trusted or the 97% who can? Leaders have to go first in the game of trust. The onus is on you to make the first move.

This week:

What can you do at work to build trust and thereby increase the speed of your organisation?

WEEK 24

Avoiding burnout

Despite my best intentions, I often find myself relentlessly busy. The pace of my life seems to be ever-accelerating. Each day I am bombarded with new information. I seem to need to work so hard just to maintain where I am - let alone to get to where I should be.

I can either:

1. Limit myself to doing a few things well. I say 'no' to the unimportant and concentrate my efforts on the most important things in front of me. I have to be disciplined to avoid getting side-tracked. I also have to rigorously examine my motives for prioritising one thing over another. I need to ask myself how valid is my underlying motive?

2. Look for others to work together with me - something usually needed for good things to multiply.

I am encouraged by reading about Moses in Exodus 18:14-27. He was in a similar situation of potential burnout as he had allowed good work to go too far. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, advised him to select capable men to share the load with him and thereby make it lighter. But I often have to struggle with myself to share the work with others. At times it's easier and simpler to do it myself. Sometimes, I just don't trust others enough. Too often I don't give people the chance to share the load with me.

This week:

As Jesus promised rest to those who are weary and burdened, how can we better live out this promise?

WEEK 25

The culture of mistrust

A client opened up to me a few days ago about the difficulties she was having at work. She described: *“During the coffee breaks in our team meetings, my boss frequently takes one of my colleagues to the corner and talk together in a low whisper. I was paranoid they were talking about me”*. She went on to explain that although she had later found out that they were not in fact talking about her, but just gossiping in general, the damage had already been done. She admitted: *“The real impact this has had is on me. I learned not to trust my colleagues.”*

Trust is such a fragile commodity. It can easily be broken even before it is built. Yet we know trust is the foundation for healthy organisational behaviour.

This got me thinking about my own behaviour. When I’m in a situation where there is not much trust, I don’t want to put myself on the line. I hold back. As a result, I don’t bring my best ideas to a situation. As I reflected further I began to ask myself – how have I unintentionally contributed to organisational mistrust? When I go to work each day do my actions actively encourage trust or do they sometimes breed mistrust?

1 John 3:18 calls us to love with actions and in truth, not just with our mouth. As leaders, staff members, facilitators our actions will speak much much louder than any fine words.

This week:

What might I do a little bit differently to help trust flourish in the groups and organisations that I’m involved with?

WEEK 26

Negativity in the workplace

Some people think that when they join a Christian organisation it will be all sweetness and light. There will be no more negativity. Sadly these expectations are rarely met.

Everyone has good reason to be negative about their work or their organisation at times. But when negativity persists, it can begin to affect everyone in the organisation. It becomes toxic. Negativity breeds mistrust. People lose motivation. The vision no longer inspires. Morale begins to drop. Identifying what creates negativity in the workplace is necessary so that steps can be taken to confront it. In the Christian organisations I have worked in these are some of the common causes:

Inaction – When people complain about something, but do nothing to resolve the situation, the workplace can quickly become

negative. In the hope of being kind, in Christian organisations we sometimes choose not to confront difficult issues. It takes courage and effort to address problems.

Gossip – In Christian organisations, what starts as genuine concern for the whole person, sometimes degenerates into gossip. People appear more concerned with what others are doing outside of work than during work.

Secrets – Information is power. We are all human and can be seduced by this power. We treat certain information as confidential (even when it is not). We share it only with a favoured few. This causes a breakdown in communication and key people may be left out and feel undervalued.

Pride – Even in Christian organisations many people believe that their opinion is the only correct one. Instead of trying to see things from others' points of view, they disregard opinions other than their own. No wonder pride is the original sin.

This week:

What causes negativity in your workplace?
What can we do to reduce it?
How can we prevent it from damaging our organisations?

WEEK 27

85% is about people

Research by Harvard University suggests that 85% of the reason people get a job, keep that job, and move ahead in that job has to do with people skills and knowledge. Only 15% is because of their technical ability.

Human relationships are the most important factor in the performance of any organisation. Organisational change processes stand or fall on the quality of relationships. How does this fact influence how we spend our time? If we are leading or managing people, how much time do we spend listening to them? How does this compare with the time we spend in front of our computers, on emails, policy papers or reports?

The critical success factor for us as leaders or change agents will be our relationships – whether we have earned people's trust.

At times this people-focus is a great joy. At other times it is a real pain. Some relationships are just downright difficult.

Sometimes we need the courage to confront and point people to higher standards of behaviour and performance. At others we need to forgive and let things go. It takes discernment to know the difference. Strengthening relationships requires both the grace of God and a deep reservoir of love for the people we work with. How much do we genuinely care about our work colleagues? Do we see them through God's eyes?

This week:

Who do you find most difficult to work with?

What could you do to improve that relationship?

WEEK 28

Remembering why we're here

It's amazing how easily we forget why we do what we do. I was really encouraged recently to read the personal introduction from a colleague appointed as Country Director in Bangladesh. He took his inspiration for his job from Paul's instruction in Philippians 2:4, *'Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others'*.

This reminded me of my early days in the mountains in the Philippines working in health. I also reconnected with how I felt in 2001 when I joined an international development agency in Cambodia. I remembered my energy, my passions and my dreams. I saw God's vision clearly. It was obvious why I was doing what I was doing – I was serving others.

All too often nowadays I am simply too busy. The travel demands mean that I sometimes focus more on logistics than purpose. I can get discouraged when the visible impact is not immediately obvious. Sitting in an office I easily get caught up with my day-to-day role. And I'm even tempted to prioritise career and promotion. It is a long way from my early days – my formative 'Genesis' experiences.

My prayer today is for God to bring us back to that place where God first called us and be renewed by God's spirit. Let us find rest in God.

This week:

When did you feel closest to your sense of calling?

What is it that really inspires you?

WEEK 29

Don't send that email!

As soon as I clicked 'Send' I knew I had made a mistake. I knew that this message was not the sort to write and send in anger. At the same time I felt a rush of excitement. I thought: *'Finally I'm showing some guts, I'm proving I'm no longer just a lap-dog'.*

My email essentially accused a group of colleagues of being the root cause of the culture of criticism that I felt had come to permeate all our office interactions. In my brief moment of 'righteous fury' I was convinced that the blame was all but mine. In one blow, however uncharacteristic, I managed to jeopardize years of trust and (mostly) good relations.

The golden part of this story is how my colleagues reacted and how they acted towards me. Yes, there were some tears and

awkward moments. But as I look back on the days that followed I can honestly say that they have become a precious memory for me. As I was trying to clean up the mess I had made, I encountered so much love and care. I soon saw a maturity in my colleagues, that previously I had been blind to. My contempt transformed into awe and appreciation.

I know I should not have sent that e-mail. But all the same I love the effect it had...

This week:

What e-mails should you not send?

What can you do instead?

WEEK 30

Managing expectations

Expectations are a bit tricky. On the one hand, expectations are essential to energise any change. Ambitious expectations inspire hope. But on the other hand, so often disagreements and conflicts arise in a project because stakeholders have differing expectations.

In a recent organisational assessment that I was involved in, staff complained that community expectations were too high. And perhaps more importantly the NGO and community had different expectations about who is responsible for what, who does what and who provides for what. The failure to address these mismatched expectations caused on-going stress amongst staff. The community was losing trust in the NGO. Expectations may be essential, but they should not be taken for granted. They need to be carefully managed in a collaborative way.

In our own organisations, we also have to learn how to manage expectations. It's always good to be willing to go the extra mile, but we should not be afraid to point out when something is unrealistic. It's better to be honest about expectations from the beginning. Otherwise problems will only resurface later. We sometimes feel guilty for saying 'no'. We try to avoid awkward situations and so leave necessary negotiation undone. This inevitably leads to frustration and disappointment.

This week:

What can you do to better manage expectations with those you work alongside?

WEEK 31

A simple exercise in trust

We should know how important trust is in a team, in an organisation or in a partnership. But how do you do this in practical ways? In Patrick Lencioni's excellent book 'The Advantage' (2012:28) he talks about a critical first step he goes through to develop vulnerability-based trust:

"We take teams through a quick exercise where we ask them to tell everyone, briefly, a few things about their lives. In particular we ask them to say where they were born, how many siblings they have, where they fall in the order of children, and finally, what the most interesting or difficult challenge was for them as a kid..."

This discussion takes just 15-20 minutes and it always works... people are genuinely surprised at what they didn't know about their

colleagues' backgrounds. It inevitably leads to a newly found sense of respect because of the admiration that comes when someone realises that one of their peers endured and overcame a hardship or accomplished something remarkable. More important, team members begin the process of getting comfortable with vulnerability when they realise that it is okay, even gratifying, to tell their peers something about themselves that they had never mentioned or been asked about before"

This week:

What opportunities do you have to replicate this simple exercise in a team you are involved with?

How can you as a leader go first being vulnerable to develop trust?

WEEK 32

Are you a learner or a drifter?

I was recently invited to visit a Malaysian organisation. My immediate response was to ask them: 'What would you like me to do for you? How can I best serve you? I was already wondering about training I could conduct and advice I could give. The local organisation stopped me with their answer: *'No, there is nothing specific technically. But we would like to build a relationship with you. We want to get to know you. We want you to understand who we are and what inspires us to do what we do'*.

Their honest answer humbled me. Working as a consultant, it's easy to assume that I'm here to give (sometimes appearing disguised as service to others). I forget what I can learn from them. How about the inspiration that they will give me?

It reminded me of a similar experience a while back. I had been invited to visit a project in a remote part of the Philippines. I had thought about the technical things that needed to be done. On arrival, the person who invited me sat me down in his office. He told me about how many people he had met in conferences and meetings. He called them "drifters" - people who go here and there but never stopped to build meaningful relationships. He said that the main purpose of my visit should be to build relationships with the people who worked there and with the community that they worked with. He wanted me to experience how they live daily. It proved to be a very blessed and inspiring trip.

This week:

Wherever you are, how can you learn from those you are working with?

How do you avoid being a drifter?

WEEK 33

Feeling empty and dry?

Sitting down to write this thought I feel empty. I'm not sure what to say this week. For no obvious reason, everything seems a bit of a struggle. Sometimes I feel like I'm 'soaring like an eagle', at other times 'walking and not fainting' is an achievement. At other times it's about simply standing. What do you do when you feel like you are in 'a dry and desolate place where there is no water'?

I'm tempted to just pick a thought from something I've written before. I can do things in my own strength. I can ignore this yearning for refreshment. I can keep busy. I can let my attention wander. I can avoid looking inside and asking myself what's really going on.

No, today I have to force myself to stop, to dig deeper into my relationship with God. I remember the words of St Augustine who

prayed: *'Oh God, you have made us for yourself, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.'*

If I am to bring the best of myself to my work this week, I have to put my spiritual life in order. I can only be a 'steward of grace' to others, when I have received God's grace myself. I can only hope to discern God's leading in various complicated work situations if my thoughts are uncluttered with my own stuff.

David in Psalm 62:5 said: *'Yes, my soul, find rest in God.'* Today I will force myself to do just that.

This week:

Pray that God will refresh your spirit.

How will you find rest in God?

WEEK 34

Voicing fear

Fear is not always a bad thing. A fear of failure can motivate us to put in extra effort. Fear can stop us from doing things we know will hurt us. But when fear becomes the main factor in decision-making this can be very damaging. When it holds us back from doing what we think may be right, it is highly dangerous. The management writer Dorothy Marcic observes: *'Fear is one of the greatest diseases of mankind and it is rampant in organisations and group decision-making processes'*.

One simple exercise I have often used with Christian organisations is to get them to imagine they are the Israelites on their Exodus journey, after 18 months looking into the Promised Land. What are the giants that they see?

If we ignore fears about the future, they do not simply evaporate. They will surface later, often at the most inconvenient time. Until those fears have been acknowledged, people find it hard to think positively, let alone creatively. Sometimes merely naming the giants is enough to remove irrational fears. Voicing fears can also clarify any misunderstandings. Sometimes naming the fears enables proper assessment and then management of the risks. This can help implementing the change. One time I got leaders to openly share their own fears after they had presented the options for the future. They named the 'elephants in the room'. Their honesty completely altered the atmosphere. Staff recognised that they were all on the same side. Bringing fears into the light is almost always helpful.

This week:

What decisions do you have to make?

How could you surface and manage fears in a productive way?

WEEK 35

How do we learn humility?

How do we become humble? It is not something we are born with, nor a skill we pick up. We only learn humility from experience – and not usually from success, but from failure and brokenness. Perhaps we only become truly humble when we are brought low, stripped of pretences and defences, and left feeling empty. It may not be an attractive process, but if we are to cultivate humility, I fear it is an essential one.

It may be better if we stopped thinking of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities as something to be fixed or hidden away, but something that God can use to reveal his grace. When we are broken, we aren't driven by the need to impress people or secure their approval. 'The gift of a handicap' is how The Message translates Paul's 'thorn in the flesh'.

Dan Allender in his excellent book 'Leading with a Limp', points out:

'To the degree you face and name and deal with your failures as a leader; to that same extent you will create an environment conducive to growing and retaining productive and committed colleagues... The surest success comes through being honest about failure. This is definitely not an easy path... If you do not have the capacity to confess, acknowledging in real time how much you mess up, the result will be a workplace that becomes more cowardly and employees who become more self-committed, more closed to you and to one another and more manipulative...'

This week:

We will all fail in some ways. We may misuse the power we have been entrusted with. We may fail to listen. We may get decisions wrong. Our response to our failures has a powerful influence on those around us. The question is not whether you will fail, but 'What you will do about it?'

WEEK 36

It's not so hard to encourage

Encouragement is under-rated. I often find myself thinking people and organisations will only improve when I point out where they are going wrong and how they can do things better. I spend so much of my working life observing, listening, reading and critiquing other's efforts. I'm expected to make judgements - especially as a consultant. Certainly honest feedback is an important way to catalyse change, but it's not the only way. Evidence suggests that most people respond remarkably well to encouragement. We grow into others' opinions and expectations of us - or as Goethe puts it:

“Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be.”

Many of us find it difficult to encourage others. It makes us feel vulnerable. But perhaps being vulnerable is not such a bad place to be. It may even catalyse change in those around us.

This week:

Find 'one true and encouraging thing' to say to each of the people you work with.

WEEK 37

Faithful shrinking

I like to think of myself as not ‘too’ ambitious. After all I’ve never really worried about career advancement. But if I’m honest I have to admit that I am achievement-oriented. At work I like to feel I am making a difference; getting things done; being successful. I want people to recognise my contribution. I want to influence others more and more.

I’m sub-consciously assuming that my role is to make my work or ministry successful. But maybe I have got it wrong. Is my pursuit of achievement; success; growth merely a reflection of a numbers-obsessed culture? Have I made success my god? Jesus seemed more concerned with faithfulness. In Matthew 25:21, he praised the servant for being faithful, not successful.

In his provocative book *Shrink*, Tim Suttle asks whether we should lay down our expectations of growth and accept that shrinking may be the way forward. He points to John 3:30 which says ‘*I must decrease. He must increase*’. He says that leadership is not so much about being effective as about embodying Christ (who in the world’s eyes was spectacularly unsuccessful).

This week:

What would be different if you removed the pressure of numbers?

What would change if you focused on being faithful, rather than successful?

WEEK 38

Who influences you?

I share an office with a funny colleague, so I find I'm frequently making jokes. It's because he makes them all the time. During a recent meeting, I made a comment and realised *'Hey, that's not my sort of joke. It's his'*. The same happens the other way round. When he was discussing a project with our head of department, she can hear from my colleague that we had been talking together about it.

We are profoundly influenced by the people close to us. If we are around happy people, we tend to feel happy. Those who are depressed make us feel sad. Emotions and attitudes are contagious.

Jesus was also influenced. But not by His disciples; not by those who opposed Him; not by the people who were worshipping Him because of the miracles He did; not even by the

Devil himself. He was influenced by His Father in heaven. He said: *"I say to you the Son can do nothing of His own accord, but only what He sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise"*. (John 5:19).

Jesus invites us into a very intimate relationship with Him and with His Father (John 17:22). And through His Holy Spirit, we are able to grasp what we should do, in the situations and circumstances of life. That goes much deeper than making a checklist or prioritising. It involves letting go of control. It is about being still and opening yourself to what God is saying to you. And then responding.

This week:

How can we focus on and be influenced by things that are 'true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable' (Phil 4:8)?

When will you make time to be still?

WEEK 39

Motivating others

Recently, I was facilitating a workshop on implementing a strategic plan. We spent a lot of time discussing staff engagement. It seemed to be a major issue. I asked the eight participants from different projects the question: 'How do you motivate staff to get more engaged in their work?' I was shocked. Together they came up with 89 ideas! They were overflowing with creative ways to motivate and inspire staff.

We limit our thinking when we assume that staff are simply motivated by external rewards. We are misguided if we think motivation is all about salaries and benefits. Research reveals a different reality. The top motivator for staff performance is not salary, but it is being recognised for a job well done. People usually respond well to positive, truthful feedback from others. Genuine and encouraging words

cost nothing. Yet somehow, despite their positive impact on performance, they are still surprisingly rare.

This week:

Who do you need to motivate?

What really makes them tick and how could you motivate them?

WEEK 40

Confidence is the key

What most people call mentorship is actually mostly about building people's confidence. In the last week alone, I have received the following requests:

"I am a member of an international board and we have just appointed a CEO who would like mentorship support from a fellow Christian. Can you assist him grow in his job?"

"I am keenly interested in pursuing a Doctorate, but I need your help to decide the area to specialise in".

"We haven't spoken for quite a long time... By the way, are you in a position to be my mentor?"

As I followed-up with each one, it turned out that people were primarily looking to build their confidence. It is about accompanying our fellow workers in achieving their assigned tasks in challenging situations. This reminded me of growing up in the village and learning to ride a bicycle with a large box of dried fish on the back. Initially I hid in the bush, hoping my father would not find me. But as I gradually understood how we needed this income for school fees and as I got more confident wobbling along the track, I began to enjoy it more and more. My father sometimes held my hands, sometimes let go, sometimes encouraged, at other times even punished. But he was always patient. It is like Paul's exhortation to Timothy to pass on whatever he had witnessed to those who are ready in turn to share with others.

This week:

Who are we accompanying in their tasks?

How can we build their confidence?

WEEK 41

Developing African elephant ears

I was a bit taken aback when a colleague encouraged the workshop participants to ‘develop African elephant ears’. After all we were in a city in Thailand where tourists come to look at the elephants. What was wrong with our Asian elephants? It dawned on me that he was telling us to listen more, to really listen. African elephants have much larger ears than Asian elephants – they are not what we are used to. It is the same with listening. We need to go far beyond what we are used to.

Yet how often in my daily work do I genuinely listen to other people? If I’m honest, though I hear the words, sometimes I’m just waiting to speak. Transformative listening requires me to be fully engaged – to be listening to the words, the intentions, the emotions, even the spirit behind what is being said. No wonder people say the main characteristic of a great boss is

“ears”. No wonder the Bible says: *“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”* (James 1:19)

Quality conversations that strengthen relationship start with good questions and careful listening. What is going on in people’s lives? What makes them happy? What are they worried about?

This week:

Who are we failing to understand? Who do we need to listen to more?

How might we do this?

WEEK 42

Lasting change

A colleague was telling me about a recent meeting. A number of organisations were relating the variety of ways they were contributing to impact – building schools and roads; improving health systems; increasing access to clean water; and diversifying crops. The list went on and on. They were beginning to feel quite pleased with themselves until someone asked the penetrating question: “Yes but how has all this actually changed peoples’ lives?”

We sometimes get so caught up in activities and tangible outcomes that we forget that we are here to catalyse changes in people lives. It is not just buildings or even incomes. It is about changes in attitudes and behaviours – changes in self-identity. Lots of questions immediately leap into my mind.

What does my faith tell me about how people’s attitudes and behaviours change?

How important is spiritual change as part of this?

Is spiritual healing and reconciliation with God an essential ingredient in development?

What about places where there are strong restrictions to the gospel of Christ?

Are the struggles we face in development against more than just ‘flesh and blood’?

I believe our own lives are a key factor in fostering change in others. Amazingly, God uses us to help bring God’s love and life closer to people. It’s about God shining through us (Matthew 5:16).

This week:

Let’s look beyond our activities, and try and discern with spiritual eyes.

How can we contribute to lasting changes in peoples’ lives?

WEEK 43

Reports or relationships

How many of us have work lives dominated by reports? Reports we have to write or read. A colleague recently complained to me: *“We write these excellent reports, but so what? What happens then?”*

I too get frustrated. As I finish yet another organisational report I wonder: *“Will they really read this? Will they follow the recommendations? Why have I focused so much energy on this written document? Are there not other ways of influencing change?”*

My questions brought to mind a couple I know who are always so well-loved by their workshop participants. I’ve always credited this to their professionalism. But when I think about it, that is not completely true. It’s probably more to do with how they treat people, how they value people, how much

they genuinely listen. They reveal God in how they facilitate.

This week:

As leaders, managers and consultants, how can we listen to, value and treat our colleagues in ways that reveals grace that comes from God?

WEEK 44

Manufacturing grace?

A few days ago a Christian NGO leader asked me, *“How can I be an agent of grace in my organisation?”* It is a really good question. It made me think again about grace.

Above all grace is a gift. It is not something you create yourself, but only something you receive from God and pass on to others. In the Bible, Peter talks about us being ‘stewards of grace’. I know on a good day with human effort we can make a reasonable copy of what grace looks like. But it’s not the real thing – it’s a counterfeit. When tested by circumstances, it will fail.

So if I’m to be an agent of genuine grace this week I have to first receive this grace from God. I need continual spiritual refreshment. If I’m ‘running on empty’, my own efforts will be

tainted by self-interest or a desire to look good. My time priorities today have to change.

This week:

Where do you really find your sense of identity?

How are you receiving spiritual refreshment?

WEEK 45

Separating the personal from the professional

I was bothered by the question posed by a friend. She asked: *“As you work, do you address the issues of the organisation or the concerns of the staff?”* It made me stop and think. I found I had no quick and easy answer, only more questions...

I was reminded of a discussion with the director of a Christian NGO. He lamented that staff prayer requests were not focused on organisational issues, but on their personal concerns. I later had the chance to sit with staff over lunch. As we ate, they told me stories about their home lives; I heard painful, touching and inspiring stories. It made me wonder – even if you could separate people’s personal lives from their workplaces might you not lose the best of what people bring to life?

I work with organisations to help them strengthen their systems and structure to achieve effectiveness. Part of me likes to keep a neat separation between the personal and the professional. After all there must be some boundaries. But perhaps they are not as clear cut as I thought. Organisations are about people and I believe God sees them as more than just ‘human resources’.

As I prepare for my next assignment – the lack of work cooperation among teams, I ask myself: Is this about structures and systems or about the people involved and their relationships with each other? In seeking to promote positive change, should I be trying to integrate the personal, not dis-integrate? Improving systems and structures alone will not make my work meaningful. Somehow, I would also like my work to touch other people’s lives.

This week:

Do you know what is on the heart of the people you work with?

What burdens are they under? What inspires them?

WEEK 46

Contributing to cathedrals

"I hang around the office. I do a bit of this and that". I'd asked people to introduce themselves at the start of a 'Vision day'. I waited for him to say more, but he sat just down. It did not take a genius to work out that this particular participant was not very enthusiastic or energised by his job!

The day itself went on fine and the organisation reached a shared sense of where they should be going. But what really surprised me was the reaction of the same individual at the end. He stood up and said: *"For the many years I've worked here, I've never felt that I contribute much. After today I now see that my work has meaning. My small pieces of work are part of a much greater whole".*

I realised that it's not really much about the organisation that made the session a success

but how it touches the individuals involved. It reminded me of the story of three bricklayers. You may well know it:

A man came across three bricklayers busy at work. He asked the first bricklayer, *"What are you doing?"* *"I'm laying bricks,"* the first one said.

The man asked the second bricklayer the same question. *"I'm putting up a wall,"* he replied.

The passer-by then turned to the third bricklayer. *"What are you doing?"* he asked. *"I'm building a great cathedral,"* the third bricklayer replied.

This week:

How will you inspire those you work with?

What cathedrals are you contributing to?

WEEK 47

Interceding at work

Intercessory prayer does not come naturally for me. My prayers are usually quite self-centered. But one time, whilst assisting on a job, I believe God uniquely used my intercessory prayer to contribute to his redemptive work in the life of an organization.

In preparation for a two-day intervention I began praying, fasting and trying to listen to God for what might be in store. I had a really lovely half hour walk to work and one morning the word “atrophy,” hit my mind/heart. This was a bit confusing as I have hardly ever used the word. It means wasting away through lack of use. Nevertheless, I wrote it down in my journal and carried on.

About a month later we were at the workshop. The participants were walking back into the conference room carrying some dubious

drawings on flip charts. We had asked them to creatively represent what they believed to be the major obstacle to their team’s success. One person unfolded her sheet to reveal the outline of a shriveled lung. She explained that she felt like the team was “atrophying” due to an unwillingness to confront a particular issue and that unless they addressed it, this would be their demise. She dramatically and succinctly put to words a feeling that was resonating throughout the room. She drew what God had whispered to me a month prior.

I spoke with her privately immediately afterwards and showed her my journal. We both were a bit shocked by God’s co-creating with us. She asked me to pray as she felt she was being called to hold the team accountable in the following weeks. Subsequently, this team was able to move in great courage in truly inspirational ways. What extraordinary moments invade our work when we intercede for our work!

This week:

What work situations are on your heart to pray for?

WEEK 48

Grace in conflict

My stomach tightened as I remembered the situation. I was catching up with a friend about some work colleagues I used to supervise. I cringed inside when I thought about the intense conflict which I had tried for months to mediate. They were good people with genuine intentions, but they had incompatible styles of working. Things got so bad that in the end we all agreed that the only way forward was to separate. I was so sad. I'd failed to fix things. But as we ended it, we created opportunities for them to forgive each other as they moved on.

Imagine my delight when I found out some years later that these people were working together again – this time successfully. They now get on well, it was as if the past hadn't happened. At the time trying to mediate had been so emotionally draining. But what I

see now is that when human strength and wisdom are not enough, God's grace is always sufficient. It is only God's undeserved grace which can genuinely restore relationships.

This week:

How can I be a 'steward of grace' (1 Peter 4:10)?

Who do I need to apologise to or forgive?

Where do I need to rely more on God's transforming grace?

WEEK 49

A bit more forgiveness...

'It may sound odd for a professor of business to say this, but I reckon that our organisations could do with a deal more loving, a bit more forgiveness and a lot more faith in other people'.

It's one of my favourite quotes from Charles Handy, a leading management writers over the last 50 years.

Perhaps when Jesus said we had to forgive seventy times seven times, he might also have meant that we had to forgive the same offence over and over again.

How do people in your organisation respond when things go wrong; when people let them down? How do you react? Mistrust and resentment may be reasonable, but ultimately destructive, responses. The only real antidote

is facing the situation with both truth and grace (John 1:14). It may be unappealing and a huge struggle, but it is only forgiveness that can really transform difficult workplace relationships.

This week:

What could you do to make 'truth and grace' more part of your office culture?

WEEK 50

A word of encouragement

We all need appreciation - particularly if we are feeling fragile or low. It refreshes and energises our soul. Sadly in some Christian NGOs we take each other for granted. Yes, there may be plenty of sweet words, but not enough genuine heart-felt encouragement.

One workshop participant told me recently that she had signed up for the training, partly to learn, but even more to be encouraged. She had even prayed about it the night before, asking God for an encouraging word that day. She was delighted to share that God answered her prayer.

But she went on to ask me: *“Does the Bible not tell us to encourage each other? So what hinders us from encouraging others?”* I thought about it a bit. After all encouraging other people really is not costly. So what

holds me back? I went on to ask myself, “Does my life encourage others? Who? How?” 1 Thessalonians 5:11 came to mind: *“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up...”* I prayed that I would be an encouragement to someone that day.

This week:

Who might need encouraging?

What opportunities can I take or make to encourage them?

WEEK 51

Dare to look inside

'When we set out to do good, but carry out our attempts without the discipline of attending to our own stuff which lies beneath and opening ourselves up to God's presence, evil is always close at hand' Ruth Haley Barton

As leaders or change agents we have others' lives in our hands. It is a sacred responsibility. Knowing ourselves, the strengths we bring and also the dark sides we carry, is not an optional extra. It is a requirement for healthy leadership and consulting. Without this self-awareness we will naturally manipulate people and situations to fit our own preferences.

I like to think well of myself, so I find it deeply disturbing to ponder the less savoury aspects to my character. Yet I know that each of my strengths has a shadow side. To facilitate positive change, I need to first become aware

of and then attend to 'the stuff that lies beneath'. I need to 'open this up to God's presence'.

This week:

Choose to work on your awareness of yourself.

Identify your talents. Then go on to explore the possible negative consequences of your strengths.

Pay attention to any strong emotions, things that really annoy or excite you. What do you learn about yourself from this?

Open up this whole self - warts and all - to God's presence.

WEEK 52

Look back and remember

A couple of weeks ago I facilitated a reflection exercise with an organisation to look back at its life over the last 15 years. We recalled the events and accomplishments in the organisation. We also looked at the high points and the low points on the journey and how people felt during those times. Participants shared their memories. At the end, I asked them to think about who they are and what has characterised how they have worked together over the years. It was a good session. The participants were encouraged and inspired. It reawakened people's commitment to actively engage in the day-to-day work.

This exercise reminded me of Joshua's final speech. During Joshua's farewell, he looked back at all that God has done during his leadership. In Joshua 24: 31, it says "*Israel*

served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua". Joshua emphasised that God is the only source of their success.

It is immensely valuable every now and then to look back as an organisation, to contemplate the journey and recognise how God has been with you all the way.

This week:

Plan time with your team (however short) to stop and reflect. Look back and ask yourselves how things have gone, what you have learned, and where did you sense God's presence this year. Create space to reconnect with why you do what you do.

About the authors

Elaine Vitikainen is a creative facilitator focusing on Organisational Development and leadership development. Originally from the Philippines, Elaine has always been inspired to serve others. She started as a dentist volunteering among the mountain tribes before specialising in multilingual education in Cambodia with International Cooperation Cambodia (ICC). Elaine was also a part of the Executive Team and now the board chair for ICC. She then moved to Laos with SIL International. She worked across Asia facilitating change with local organisations.

Elaine believes passionately in the importance of integrating faith in professional life. After 15 years in Asia, Elaine has recently moved to Helsinki, Finland with her husband and two sons.

Rick James is passionate about integrating the spiritual and professional dimensions to organisational change in a creative and inclusive way. Eight years ago he helped establish the Space for Grace learning group which now has almost 500 members from 50 countries. Rick has been meddling with NGOs and churches as a consultant on leadership and organisational change for the past 25 years.

Rick is fond of writing up his learning from these experiences, resulting in six books including *Creating*

Space for Grace; Inspiring Change and Demystifying Organisation Development and more than 50 articles. He has a PhD in NGO Management from CASS Business School, London where he is currently a Visiting Fellow. Rick is married, has two daughters and lives in Bath, UK.

Lorentz Forsberg is a capacity development adviser at the Swedish Mission Council (SMC). He supports organisation development, learning and evaluation in the work of the SMC member organisations and their partners. He was born and raised in Tanzania, and draws most of his mission and development experience from different African contexts.

Lorentz is one of the initiators of the Space for Grace learning group, and persistently advocates for integrating faith in change interventions - on individual, organisational and societal level. Lorentz is a 'behind-the-scene' kind of person, most at ease when supporting others to fulfil their mission and develop their potential. He lives in Uppsala, Sweden, is married and the father of two.

William Ogara is currently focusing on leadership coaching as Executive Director of CLEAR Africa. He has 25 years' experience with CORAT Africa accompanying churches and their leaders across Africa through processes of fundamental change and renewal. Along the way he picked up an MBA from Brunel University, UK

and PhD in Organisational Change and Renewal from La Salle University, USA.

William has a strong background in governance too, recently completing his second term on the board of the Central Bank of Kenya. He is also a faculty member of Centre for Corporate Governance and Associate Professor at the Great Lakes University. William serves in the Anglican Church of Kenya as Honorary Treasurer and Strategy Advisor.

Pieter Messelink is currently working with the Mission Organisation of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. This puts him in touch with churches and organisations in India, Benin, Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba. He likes the variety of personal contacts. He lives in the “Family on Mission” community with his wife and four children in Zwolle. This is a group of families intensely sharing their lives; all with a heart for reaching out to the last, least and lost in the city. To keep a healthy balance, Pieter likes to go for a good run from time to time or escape to the nature outside the city for some relaxed bird-watching. It is the silence of these activities that helps him to hear God’s soft voice for a next step in life!

Tobias Nyondo is the Director, Global Grants Compliance for World Vision International. Originally from Malawi, but currently based with his family in Washington DC, USA, Tobias’ work

keeps him on the road (or in the air) a lot. He has already consulted for World Vision Offices in over 90 countries!

Tobias is passionate about leadership development and is a globally renowned motivational speaker. He holds an Executive MBA from ESAMI. But he is also deeply committed to local change serving on the board of a children’s hospital in Malawi as well as a church-based development agency called Eagles Relief and Development.

Grace Stewart is the Director of Program Services for the West Virginia Child Advocacy Network where her passion for grassroots movements and social justice translates to facilitating strategic planning, providing technical assistance, and supporting program development throughout the state. She has worked in Kenya, South Sudan and the United Kingdom where she served in reconciliation and church ministry.

Grace is passionate about prayer, storytelling and telling stories about what happens when you pray. She has a MA in International Relations & Comparative Economics from Appalachian State University. She lives on a farm in West Virginia where she rides horses and keeps bees.

Doreen Mwesigye Kwarimpa-Atim is a Ugandan OD practitioner who works as a private consultant mostly in East Africa. She enjoys supporting organizations and individuals to reflect on and learn from their experiences to create a new beginning. She also has a passion for developing transformational leadership in civil society organizations. She does much of this as an associate consultant with EASUN - Centre for Organizational Learning in Tanzania.

Doreen has worked extensively with churches and church based organizations at national, continental and international levels. She believes that OD processes and values strengthen the church as a place for hope for individuals, families, and communities. Doreen is married to Kenneth and together they have three sons.

Space for Grace is a network focused on learning about organisational development (OD) with Christian organisations and churches. Members share a commitment to integrating Christian faith with OD practice. For more information and to become a member, please visit www.spaceforgrace.net

