

# Some Stories of Leadership

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It is hard to overstate the importance of effective leadership in Christian organisations. Nearly 30 years of development experience has taught me that leadership is the greatest factor that impacts the health, well-being and effectiveness of an organisation. As Warren Bennis says: 'An organization short on capital can borrow or raise more, but an organisation short on leadership has little chance of survival'. The culture of an organisation is determined by the example of leadership, whatever the structure and policies might say. The Global President's or Bishop's behaviour influences the entire organization right to the fieldworker on the ground. Leadership is also not just about the CEO, it is practiced throughout the organisation. Looking back, I wonder whether we have given Christian leadership the attention and support it requires.

## Defining Leadership Roles

Some years back a number of national offices of a major global Christian NGO were having poor audits and poor impact. Two or three were threatened with closure. Initially we thought the issues needed addressed were primarily technical, but as we probed we found there were issues of leadership and management at the core. I was given the responsibility for setting up a team to provide OD and senior leadership support to the poorest performing countries. We found that by focusing on leadership and strategy interventions, within three years some of these country offices became the best performing.

One of the main issues was that leaders were not clear about their roles. They were not sure what their performance would be judged against. They did not know what they had to do to succeed. They were subsumed by an overwhelming number of diverse demands and expectations. So we helped the leaders themselves and their teams to develop clearer definition of their roles in their specific cultures and contexts. They prioritised the most critical expectations they had to satisfy. Over the next months and years we regularly followed up leaders in these mutually agreed areas for accountability. We provided hands-on coaching with the national Director and the Senior Leadership Team. The Regional Director did not waver from their criteria, but reviewed them on a monthly basis with the national directors in an effort to help them reach their own standards. This accountability made all the difference. By helping leaders understand what it meant to lead, where they needed equipping and by getting them to align country strategies (calling) with capacity, we saw results we did not believe possible.

## Moving leaders on

But clearly sometimes, leadership issues were not just down to a lack of clarity or understanding. In some cases we had the right person – capable but in the wrong job. Some were not adequately equipped for the job which had outgrown them (and they had not kept up). We then had to determine does the person have the capacity / capability to grow back into the job? If so, how can we help them? And if not, what role would be a better match for them? In other cases we had the wrong person as well as wrong job. They either simply did not have the capacity to become effective leaders or did not have the integrity to withstand the pressures and temptations on leaders. It was vital to confront such issues and move people on (ideally in ways which helped them realise their potential in other areas). This is why it is so important in any organisation to have accountability structures that allow for leaders to be moved on, if they are not prepared to move on themselves.

It is also important to recognize that all leaders need to keep growing and developing. They may enter the job today prepared but by tomorrow if they are not learning and growing they will fall behind. No organization is static, nor should any leader be. Yet too often the organization grows and expands and there is not corresponding investment in the growth and development of its leaders. Investing in leadership development is both biblical and wise -- perhaps more important than any program investment. Funding ministry programs without also building leadership and organizational capacity is poor stewardship

### **Succession and self-deception**

Succession is one of the most problematic issues in Christian NGOs. It is so important to leave at the right time. This is eased when we have practiced the biblical example of continually developing others. Indeed the primary role of leaders is to develop others. But in my experience too few leaders do that. One of the reasons is the self-deception that is so endemic in leadership. We are all subject to sin and temptation (indeed the question is not whether we will be tempted and fail but when and how will it happen). But for leaders self-deception (causing pride) is one of the biggest temptations. The higher we go in leadership the more likely we are to be self-deceived. We get put on pedestals. We may feel irreplaceable. People do not give us honest feedback and we start believing myths about ourselves. Unless corrected this has the greatest potential to jeopardize our personal and organizational effectiveness.

It is vital to help leaders by holding a mirror up to them. Yet this is so difficult to do. Even when leaders say they are committed to the process, they find it tough. Most do not like hearing any negative feedback. To intervene in such a situation requires considerable trust and credibility. It takes a lot of time to build this. I sometimes find I leap in too soon with my analysis, making leaders retreat into their safety zone or become defensive

### **Spiritual Leadership**

But during my time in Africa I also had the privilege of learning so much about good leadership too. Three people in particular, Wilfred, Dan and Tim provided inspiring role models. They revealed the importance of spiritual leadership within bureaucratic organisations. Every time we gathered as a region to work on strategy they launched a prayer process. During the meetings they had two or three people praying continually in a separate room for the meeting purpose, for the outcomes and for the people attending

Prayer and discernment were integrated throughout the meetings, not just in a morning devotion. Like Elisha with his servant in 2 Kings 6, they asked for discernment to see the spiritual dimension. In the middle of particularly heavy analysis sessions they sent people away to reflect and pray. They created space for God to speak. Time and time again we saw miraculous organisational outcomes as a result.