

Spiritual leadership - bringing inside-out change

Radical change is possible in Christian NGOs. In 2003, Mzima was in crisis. Fear, division and apathy were endemic; staff demoralised and demotivated; leadership threatened and defensive. Yet within three years Mzima had transformed. Trust, openness and commitment became more the norm. Income had quadrupled. Its impact and influence had grown to unprecedented levels. How did this happen? What can we learn? The example of Mzima demonstrates a combination of strong, servant leadership with relentless prayer and painful personal confession. Change was not cheap, easy or quick. But it can happen.

Mzima is a story of leadership. Leadership prepared to let God transform them as individuals and as a group. It is a story of how a few key individuals catalysed change within the leadership team and over time within the whole national organisation. It is a story full of laughter and tears. It is the story of a struggle – at both a human and a spiritual level. It was a painful and frustrating journey. Mzima encountered issues of tribalism, elitism, arrogance, pride and sexual misconduct along the way. It was often tempting to give up. And this journey is not over. Mzima has not yet arrived.

This story reveals God at the centre of transformation. Prayer, repentance and forgiveness are interwoven throughout. The Holy Spirit was the source and inspiration of change. But it also shows that change takes human planning and organising. Staff conferences, strategies, management systems and team-building days were the means through which God brought about the changes he wanted.

Fear and mistrust

In 2002 and 2003 Mzima was in crisis. They had not had a director for over a year. In this vacuum, the leadership team had resorted to a 'command and control' style of management. This soon had degenerated into a polarised 'us' and 'them' tension between management and staff. The leadership team was seen as closed, distant and inaccessible. They appeared insensitive to the goings-on in the organisation. The story of how after a car accident, management had asked: "*How is the vehicle?*" before even asking about the staff member involved was seen as typical of their attitude. Staff felt uncared for and even intimidated. Junior staff felt victimised. They feared sacking on the slightest pretext.

Fear and division were rife. Petty kingdoms had developed. According to staff themselves, they were: "*very influenced by typical tribal lines*". Communication was poor. When asked to describe the management's behaviour, staff performed a skit, in which the leadership team came out of their meetings with mouths taped shut. In the absence of clear communication, leadership decisions leaked out through rumour and gossip. This latent conflict was affecting performance. Morale and commitment were low. Relations were so poor that the annual staff conference in 2002 was almost cancelled for fear of it being too negative.

Change from the top

Transformation started from the top. The arrival of a new country director in mid-2003 triggered change in an organisation that was desperate for an overhaul. His initial focus was working with the leadership team of six. Over the next three years this team experienced radical transformation - both as individuals and as a group. They learnt what it was to work in unity, amidst disconcerting diversity. They learnt about holding

themselves and each other to account, about building unwavering trust, and about taking collective responsibility for decisions. Their transformation affected the whole of Mzima.

The priority of prayer and fasting

Even before the new Director arrived in mid-2003 his priorities were clear and the team was hungry to respond. He sent word that on the day of his arrival he wanted to have a full day of prayer and fasting with staff. He outlined the challenges facing the office and was determined to confront them through prayer. As one staff member remarked, *“This was a very powerful prayer day that set the tone of his leadership style and prayer in the organisation.”* Another recalled his openness: *“He opened up and shared his walk with the Lord, the highs and lows and more so his failures in Mozambique.”* Staff and senior management were surprised but eager to respond to a new leadership style.

But the emphasis on prayer was not without its difficulties. When the new director joined a small group of staff praying every morning in the upper room, he was seen as favouring one ethnic group – lingering evidence of tribal sensitivities in the office. When he insisted on starting every leadership team meeting with singing and praying, some felt they were wasting valuable time. But as one team member put it, they soon realised that *“business flowed better and quicker after prayer”*. They came to appreciate prayer as the very reason for success as a leadership team.

Shared decision-making

The leadership team was the main vehicle for promoting change in the country office and change had to start with them. It was vital to improve relations and decision-making within that team of six. They were committed to modelling change for the rest of the organisation. They had to dispel the myths of leadership with actions, not just words.

The leadership team met weekly, often for a whole day; starting with an hour of prayer, praise and worship. These long meetings were often met with resistance from some members saying *“We have work to do at our desk! We discuss issues that don’t even apply to my work.”* However, soon the members realised that this time enabled people to stop seeing themselves as leaders of teams but instead the leadership team for the country office. This built trust, accountability and team cohesion. Instead of just advocating for their own interests, the team began to look for the interest of the whole organisation first. This happened through a deliberate policy of consultation and joint decision-making, combined with relentless openness. The new director was humble enough to say, *“Let’s start with me. I do not know how to do this.”* This gave the team space to try new things, to grow and to fail spectacularly. They were no longer ‘blamestorming’, but sharing responsibility for finding solutions. They no longer felt they needed to be in control. Although dissenting opinion was highly valued in discussion, once a decision was reached, each team spoke with one voice.

Every team opportunity was used to discuss issues openly and face brutal facts as honestly as possible. The principles of openness, trust, care and love for each other that were set in place in these team meetings were refined and developed by events over the next few years. It would be easy to misinterpret these mountain-top events as characteristic of the whole period. There were plenty of valleys in-between. But these peaks do help map the journey.

Team unity (2004)

Relationships within the team were deepened by the leadership meeting just before the annual staff retreat in October 2004. A group of Mzima staff and community leaders had died tragically in a car crash three weeks beforehand. Both staff and management were nervous of travelling along the same road to the meeting. As an act of solidarity with staff, the leadership team opted to drive together in a minibus, rather than fly down beforehand as was customary. The journey was emotional, particularly when they passed the smashed-up vehicle. As they drove on, people talked and prayed for the victim's families and those who survived the crash. The team started singing the old hymns of God's faithfulness. "*It was a wonderful bonding time,*" said one of the team in which the presence of the Holy Spirit was tangible.

The careful planning of logistics and process meant that the meeting was more orderly and relevant than previous events. The all-staff meeting was usually one of the most contentious times in the conference. However, this year staff were requested to submit questions in advance to the leadership team. The questions were categorised and the team met to discuss the themes and to prepare their answers. When it came to answering, any one of the leadership spoke (not just the one whose area was specifically being addressed). This was a powerful demonstration of the developing unity in the team as some staff later remarked.

Team talents (2005)

The next annual retreat provided another opportunity for building the leadership team. It also provided the forum for a talent show, which had an unforeseen and lasting impact. On the last night of the retreat a talent show was organised. The leadership team felt compelled to lead by example and give an impression of accessibility. So they decided to dress up, wear wigs, dance and sing to a popular Christian hit. There was a lot of camaraderie but also trepidation as they prepared their act. But soon as they started, the staff crowd erupted, leapt to their feet laughing and danced with abandon. The idea of leadership being remote was firmly quashed that night.

Indeed, the whole event was marked by a sense of God's presence and improving relations between the leadership and staff. According to one of the team, "*the peace and presence of the Holy Spirit on the place was like four doves letting down a soft bed sheet of peace over the entire place... it was calm and satisfying*".

Spiritual disciplines for team spirit (2005)

Soon after this retreat, the leaders took the opportunity to continue their personal development as a team by going away together on a spiritual retreat. This involved a day-and-a-half of meditation, silence and reflection. There were spiritual readings, discussions and prayer. People opened up to share – perhaps too openly for some, and without sufficient time to de-brief. But it did build individuals' own relationship with God, augmented the bonding of the team and further increased trust with each other.

'Grace and truth' in appraisals (2006)

The leadership team also used the formal appraisal process to develop openness and honesty amongst themselves. They had had appraisals for some years before, but in 2005 introduced a 360-degree appraisal process, whereby managers were appraised by direct reports, their peers and their supervisor. In 2006 the appraisals were openly discussed amongst the leadership team (having done some Myers-Briggs team development activities beforehand). The team looked at each other's appraisals and give feedback on

“What surprises you? What resonates? What do we appreciate about you?” For most team members, it was quite a disturbing process because they had not experienced such frank feedback on their performance, nor shared with each other in such a personal way. But it proved quite a profound moment and all left feeling “*great and affirmed*”. Some members positively stated: “*I’ve never had this kind of feedback before in all my life.*”

Repentance and reconciliation (2006)

Although relations within the leadership team were developing well, there was still some resentment and unrest in the wider organisation. For example, an email was circulating internationally that accused one member of management of tribalism and ‘unjust acts of favouritism.’ The email jolted the team. It prompted them to spend considerable time in prayer at their meeting just before the next staff conference. They felt the Holy Spirit wanted them to make it more personal. They then proceeded to ask each other, “*What have we done to offend you?*” People began to open up about events of the past, ongoing grievances and lack of respect between departments. It was all very raw and hard for people not to become defensive.

But as the team members reflected on what was said, something startling happened. They began to confess to one another and ask forgiveness on behalf of themselves and their teams. Team leaders were reconciled with each other.

But they were left with an important question - how were they to pass this repentance and reconciliation to the rest of the organisation? How do you structure a corporate confession?

At the subsequent annual staff meeting, all the leadership team took the stage together in front of the whole staff. They announced that what they were about to do was a serious matter. They described the tension and division in the office and began to confess again to each other in public. Initially there was silence, some people laughed nervously. As the worship team played, what appeared at first to be a joke became profoundly serious. As the “sins” or offences were read, the leadership team member would then ask, “*On behalf of the team, I ask: will you please forgive us?*” Tears and forgiveness flowed amongst leaders and staff and taboos were broken. The impact of this on staff was equally profound... many staff were reported to have said, “*You truly led by example here, now we know we can do it among ourselves in our departments and in the project areas we work in.*”

A new, but unfinished creation

As a result of such processes, relations between the leadership and staff have been restored. Communication and openness has improved. An aura of freedom of expression and transparency has emerged. At the same time discipline, a performance culture and respect of deadlines also developed. Income, staffing and work in communities has increased considerably. Perhaps more importantly the quality of the work has improved too as Mzima now collaborates more with local government and church partners.

But it is an unfinished story. Things are not yet perfect and will never be. Mzima is still staffed by human beings, not angels. Relations are still strained at times; there are still complaints of individualism and favouritism; communication still breaks down. The whole organisation has not changed as much as the leadership team. Indeed, some of the key leaders involved have already moved on, adding further uncertainty for the future.

Yet this story of Mzima clearly shows us that amazing change is possible, even in really sick organisations. We see that it requires a professional and dedicated approach to managing change. It requires leaders to model the change they aspire for in their organisations. But perhaps most importantly it requires us to create the opportunities to allow God to transform us and our colleagues in profound and painful, but ultimately positive ways.