

Leadership courage - Not flinching in the face of pain

Festus Mukoya's Story

I know God never gives leaders an easy task, but I had no idea how hard it would be to make people redundant. These were my friends and colleagues, not just budget lines. I would have done almost anything to avoid this step, but sometimes leaders have to implement tough decisions. This took more courage than I ever imagined.

It had been clear for some time that our programme needed to significantly change. Our work with street children had been developed by missionaries many years earlier. The approach was comprehensive in meeting their welfare needs, but clearly not sustainable, nor particularly empowering. The main institutional funder to the programme had been talking about increased sustainability for some years and had indicated future funding for such welfare programmes was not going to be forthcoming. We therefore had to take radical measures to increase sustainability and reduce the cost of activities to the minimum.

The original missionaries, however, now back in Europe, were adamant that such change must be resisted. I remember a call I got from one of them. It was terrible. It lasted a whole hour. He was so angry that I contemplated resigning. I said to him: 'You either have to make up the whole budget or let us change things to fit the resources we have'. When I put the phone down I thought, 'If I have to resign or get chased out, then so be it'.

But we also knew that if we changed the shape of the programme significantly then some staff would have to be phased out. These were people whom we had worked with for many years; people we had prayed with, laughed with, and had fun together with...

So we resisted and resisted. At the same time, we started doing some 'personal development seminars' for the staff. This covered issues like savings and starting small businesses. We were trying to get people to contemplate and prepare for life outside the organisation. But nothing could really prepare them, or even me, for the actual shock of dismissing people.

When as expected future funding did not come through, we had to bite the bullet. I remember clearly that Friday in 2009 when our steering committee took the awful decision that we simply could not go on any more. There was no option but to strike off certain areas. We had to get rid of nine staff out of 17 and forcefully reintegrate almost 40 street children without having completed their rehabilitation process. There was no further funding for salaries, feeding and other personal requirements at the centre. We had to reduce salaries of the remaining staff by 50%. These were my friends. I had to inform them on the following Monday of this terrible, but necessary decision. I felt the lowest I have ever been - emotionally,

spiritually and physically. Hundreds of thoughts and wishes flipped through my mind but I knew nothing could change things.

When I went home that night, it was too heavy for me. My heart and my mind and my body were not there. I was so upset I bitterly asked my wife to leave me alone. I sat slumped in a chair until 1 a.m. feeling hopeless, helpless and tears rolling down from eyes... simply grieving. I was thinking of the people I knew so well - one lady with her seven children, no husband, no education certificate ... What sort of a life was I condemning her to?

The whole of the Saturday and Sunday I sat alone. Eventually I went for a long walk in the forest. I thumped my palm so hard that it hurt. I was bereft. I tried to pray and pray. I cried out to God. It was a really 'dark night of my soul'.

On the Monday morning I went into the office and pretended I was a very strong man. I called for a staff meeting where I made the announcement. I told them that these are the departments which will be affected and these are the people involved. I said there was nothing we could do but accept them. There was total silence for five minutes. It felt like hours. The rest of the day, I spent talking to each individual affected. It took more than two hours with each staff member. I had to give them opportunity to vent their pain by weeping, airing their fears, challenges and asking what they might do. These individual sessions were the traumatizing for me. I felt so unworthy that I could not even sit in my usual office seat. The mood in the centre was very sombre for days.

Writing those dismissal letters was the most difficult thing I have ever had to do. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I gave these awful termination letters to my esteemed, hardworking and faithful employees. It was excruciatingly painful, but it had to be done. It took all my courage and more, simply not to run away.

I knew leadership takes courage. I learnt that day that it is not always a heroic, crusading courage. Sometimes courage is just about accepting the pain and not flinching.