

Facing my failure in leadership

By Festus Mukoya

I have been in leadership for many years, but I have always feared failure most of all. This made me highly sensitive to any criticism. Each day I wanted everything to be working so well that I only ever received positive feedback.

In late 2011 the inevitable happened. I had to face the harsh reality of failure as a leader. It was so humbling that I almost gave up. On the face of it things appeared to be going so well. In our peace and reconciliation programme work we were breaking new ground. The community, the church, members of staff were all highly satisfied. Their praise, confidence and trust blinded us from continuously examining ourselves in all areas. Without knowing it we had become complacent.

Donors undertook an organisational assessment of our management procedures and policies. It brought to light major weaknesses. It rated us zero in the most sensitive area of financial management. The conclusions were so disheartening that I saw total darkness in my leadership. We were informed that the preliminary findings showed that our books of accounts were the worst and far below the minimum accounting standards. It was so poor they even recommended closing the project!

I was devastated. I locked myself in the room and wept most of the day. I asked myself so many questions but without finding any answers. I could not believe that we had made such grave mistakes despite annual audits. The General Secretary persuaded the donors not to close down funding as the faults were forgivable and could be resolved. The donor accepted and wrote more developmental recommendations. But I still knew that failed. I felt I should resign.

But before I implemented this emotional decision, I set apart time to reflect on the consequences. Thank God I had just come from a powerful leadership training. As I reflected on what I had learned my thinking changed. I remembered the session on the importance of learning from feedback. When I revisited the section on the Johari Window, I saw that this feedback had given me insight into a blind spot. I called to mind what we learned about integrating spirituality and professionalism. I felt I needed the guidance of the Holy Spirit so I opened my Bible. I was led to a number of stories that showed me that failure is a necessary element to realizing the value of a gift. I discovered that when we rely on own perspective and understanding, failures can seem insurmountable. Reading about others in the Bible helped me see the bigger picture.

So instead of resigning, I summoned up my courage to accept responsibility and start to take action. The heavy recommendations needed to be achieved within three months, so we met as staff and prayed. Together we resolved to correct the mess. I realized the importance of talking with others in the midst of a crisis and not keeping it to myself. All involved staff willingly gave up their Christmas celebrations and focused on addressing the issues. We received abundance grace that the work which was to be done in three months was completed in just one month. We are almost at the stage of putting that report in the archive.

When I took courage to act in the face of my failure, God unleashed grace that I have never experienced before. This was one of the most humbling, yet most powerful leadership experiences of my life.