

## The Gift of Failure

In this learning group we have often focused on the importance of humility – whether we are a consultant, an internal change agent an NGO staff member or church leader. To be effective in influencing others, we need to be humble. Other people respond positively to authentic humility and react against pride. But how do we maintain, protect or cultivate this fickle virtue? It is so hard, especially when we have power –power that comes from our position as a leader or from our control over funding or from our expertise. Sometimes those people we interact with make it even harder for us to be humble, with their deference and their flattery.

Failure is the best way to cultivating humility. For many of us, the path to humility leads us through humiliation, when we are brought low, rendered powerless, stripped of pretences and defences, and even left feeling fraudulent, empty and useless. Festus's experience in this months' story corner illustrates this beautifully.

To recognise where we fail is actually a gift. We usually think of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities as something that needs to be healed. In fact, God often uses them as part of his design and to reveal his grace. *The Message* translation of Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' is 'the gift of a handicap'. In the Bible, we see the majority of God's appointed leaders were themselves riddled with faults and beset by failures. Perhaps we should not be so ashamed of our failures. After all, if we are broken we are no longer driven by the need to impress people or secure their approval. Acknowledging our failures can have truly beneficial effects.

In previous letters we have mentioned Dan Allender's excellent book, 'Leading with a Limp'. In it he says that:

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...

To the degree you attempt to hide or dissemble your weaknesses, the more you will need to control those you lead, the more insecure you become and the more rigidity you will impose' (Allender, 2006).

We could easily change the word 'lead' for 'fund' or 'facilitate' depending on our role. When we fail, it may feel as if we have been put into a crucible. It is hot and uncomfortable. But it may push us to ask ourselves big questions such as, Who am I really? Who could I be? Who does God want me to be? Extracting wisdom from failure is what sets apart great leaders from the Bible. It may well be what we need to become more of the person God created us to be...