

Prophets with and without honour

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My two experiences of coaching and OD work with church leaders have been radically different. In one I was asked by my pastor to help him ‘think through the issues the church is facing and then facilitate a strategic planning process’. In the second experience I was approached by a Bishop of completely different denomination. The differences between the two experiences taught me a lot about coaching in the church.

The first experience with my own pastor never really got off the ground. We had a number of conversations, but I eventually discovered after about a year that, the strategic plan had been formulated and that the pastor had decided to work with another person (also a member of the church). I was a ‘prophet without honour’ in my own church. In contrast, the second experience with the Bishop was one of my best as an OD practitioner. I was not only able to help the Bishop and the church leadership to think through the issues facing the church, facilitate a strategic planning process, but we also managed to come up with a functional and effective strategic plan implementation committee. I regularly visit them to see how they are doing. They are doing really well.

So what made the difference in these two cases?

The coaching and OD role with my own pastor did not take place. He opted for another church member. I think there are a number of factors behind this:

- My pastor has known me since I was 13 years old. He has seen me grow up in the church. In contrast the individual he chose to work with was much older than me and had not been part of the church for so long. In addition, he was a director of one of the biggest International NGOs in the country.
- My frequent travels as a consultant means that my attendance at church appears sporadic – perhaps I was perceived as being not as committed to the church and the pastor’s ideals
- In the early discussions I asked for significant participation from church members in any strategy development process

In the other church I was fully accepted. They did not know my age and my beginnings, and if they did it did not matter. They concentrated on my qualifications and experience as a consultant and writer. There was no issue of commitment because I was not a member of their church. Though I promoted the same level of participation, they did not feel threatened.

What did I learn from these two experiences?

I learnt three main lessons in dealing with church leaders. These are:

1. Church leaders, like all leaders are more comfortable to work with individuals they can respect. They are more comfortable to work with individuals that they feel have more life, spiritual and professional experience. The fact that my pastor knows me from age 13 was a major factor, in my opinion for him to opt for somebody much older. In his mind being director of a large international NGO represents very valuable life and professional experience rather than being a consultant and author like me. For the Bishop of the other church being a consultant and author represent the experience he can respect as undoubtedly he has many organizational leaders in his church. The advice *you must seek advice from those that are older than you* rings true in both cases.
2. For the helper, like myself, an element of distance and even 'myth' is important. My pastor knew me since I was young and this may have undermined his confidence in me. Perhaps he still thought of me as young. The Bishop did not know me. But he looked to my professionalism. This respect gave him faith to trust me to help.
3. The stage of development of the church and its leadership matters. My church was not comfortable with 'too much participation'. The other church encouraged it. They said they wanted to know everything people thought about the church and its leadership and how to move forward and they meant it. A key difference is that my pastor is the founder of our church while the other church is an institution that has existed for almost 2000 years. The stage of development matters. Founder leaders are much more personally tied to the identity of the institution while the other leaders understand that they have 'just joined a relay race'. The bishop said he was more concerned about making 'his leadership period' stand out from those who came before him and those who will come after him. The ability to separate the Church's and the leaders' identities make participatory approaches easier to adopt and implement.

Finally, what would I say to somebody who is trying to work with church leaders on change processes? They should demonstrate maturity – life, professional and spiritual experience, understand the stage of development of the church and its leadership and work with methods that are appropriate to the identified stage; and finally cultivate and maintain a healthy degree of professional distance to earn the needed respect.