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Nehemiah: The Servant Leader

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Robert Greenleaf offers the following thoughtful definition of *servant leadership*:

The servant-leader *is* servant first.... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure the other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test...is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?¹

His view is compatible with the understanding of servant leadership emerging from the remarkable experience of Nehemiah, a determined and unselfish postexilic Jew serving in the Persian court four centuries before Christ in the Persian Empire.

NEHEMIAH: THE SERVANT LEADER

Leaders make choices all the time. They can settle for what is—or dream about what might be. When they devote themselves to such dreams, they invite those around them to share the vision and travel with them on a journey toward realization. One such visionary was Nehemiah. Born into a displaced Jewish family in a foreign land, he is introduced in the Hebrew scriptures one hundred and forty-one years after the final sacking of Jerusalem. He had no personal knowledge of the city, but like other Jews in captivity, he looked to the ancient capital as his ultimate home, the place his heart resided. It was a place that gave meaning to his existence. We see just how much he cared about his distant homeland when news of the broken and crumbled walls and the burnt gates came to his attention.

Feeling helpless, he did the only thing that made sense to him: he prayed. This prayer is the first of nine recorded in the book that bears his name. We witness his anguish as he fasts, weeps, mourns, and prays. Despite being a slave of the king, he refers to himself as God's servant. The reality is that he was a slave, a dispensable person, a cupbearer.² His job was to taste the wine before it was passed to the king. Since predecessors to the current king had lost their lives through poisoning, his role was uncomfortably vital to the ongoing existence of the king! He lived under the shadow of death.

Nehemiah's prayer was one of intercession. Three prerequisites for this type of prayer can be identified: "jealousy for God's reputation, love for one's fellows, and indifference for one's own life and destiny."³ Although the recorded prayer of chapter 1 is brief, it was part of four months of Nehemiah's persevering intercession before God, which opened an opportunity for him to raise the issue with Artaxerxes, the king. Nehemiah, noted as a cheerful person of hope and courage, had never allowed emotions of sorrow or suffering to show while in the king's presence. It may have been because of his demeanour that he secured his position in the king's court. But the sadness he experienced for Jerusalem and his people spilled over into his working life and was noted by the king. Immediately Nehemiah became dreadfully afraid—he could have at that moment come under suspicion, and it could have cost him his life. But again

he prayed. And God granted him vision as well as the extraordinary courage to follow through with his petition.

Four months of praying had given him the courage to present to the king the reason for his sadness. When the king demanded, “What is it you want?” (Neh. 2:4),⁴ Nehemiah was quick to pray and swift in his answer. Although he had no skills as an architect or builder, expertise that would seem requisite for the task that lay before him, he pled, “Send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it” (2:5).⁵ A vision was clearly announced. The king, touched by the courageous heart of his servant, asked how long such a project would take. He demanded a time frame and assurance of Nehemiah’s return. Although Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem and had only mental pictures of chaos and destruction, he ventured to define the time needed to rebuild the walls and the city. He likely asked for and received permission to take a few years, not the twelve he eventually needed and was granted for the task. Those residing in Jerusalem had not accomplished the rebuilding after more than fifty years. Rational analysis would confirm it was an impossible task even in a lifetime. Yet a servant leader waits on God for vision and has courageous faith.

Nehemiah was so committed to the vision that he was not afraid to ask for help. Miraculously the king gave him letters of introduction to the surrounding leaders, an armed escort, and the means to get the job done. This servant leader is an example of this principle: If you are to receive, first you must ask.

THE CHALLENGE

It should not be overlooked that the rebuilding of the Temple took place under Ezra at which time a spiritual revival had begun in Jerusalem. Nehemiah was not just a leader who arose in a vacuum. God had been preparing the way for the next step in the journey, and He used leadership to further His purposes.

Visionary leadership evokes both the worst and the best in people. Whenever a leader begins a project, calls out vision from the community, or promotes a direction embraced by the community, there will be opposition. Nehemiah was dogged by local leaders opposed to

what he was doing. They quickly moved from being opposers to outright enemies. Nehemiah encountered opposition before he even arrived in Jerusalem. Sanballat and Tobiah quickly moved from feeling disturbed by this new leader to engaging in caustic sarcasm. Their mockery was interspersed with laughter and derision. As Nehemiah remained committed to his vision, their sarcasm turned to threats, and the threats became outright guerrilla warfare. Ultimately they sought to use an insider, a trusted confidant, to lure the man of God into a death trap. Strong leadership evokes equally strong reaction. Few people remain neutral; sides are clearly taken.

External opposition is easier to handle than internal strife. Conflict and misunderstanding are common when one casts vision, even when the community embraces it, because some persons involved have their own agendas. Often the leader of leaders will become a mediator between members of a team. The challenge calls for an understanding of the underlying interests, attention to the process, excellent communication techniques, and especially negotiating skills. We see these skills used effectively in chapter 5 when Nehemiah learns that the wealthy are using the opportunity to profit from the poorer workers.

Nehemiah spent his first three days in the city watching and listening. Several thousand years later Greenleaf⁶ identified twelve characteristics that are seen in the life of the servant leader. The first is “listening,” followed by “empathy.” These are characteristics demonstrated by Nehemiah. He listened to the reports, then merely observed what had been happening. In both processes he was deeply empathetic. He did not share the vision of the rebuilding until he had a good understanding of the situation and the challenge he faced. He said, “I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem” (2:12). He did a full survey of the needs so that he could comprehend the task in detail. He then spelled out the vision and issued his challenge: “See the trouble we are in. . . . Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace” (2:17).

Greenleaf traces the attributes of a servant leader in progression from empathy to awareness and then persuasion. Kouzes and Posner also endorse this flow from empathy to awareness and persuasion: “To truly hear what constituents want—what they desperately hope

to make you understand, appreciate, and include within the vision—requires periodically suspending regular activities and spending time listening to others.³⁷ Nehemiah engaged with the community in their shared sense of God’s will for them, which required listening and empathy. In the process, awareness was advanced, and he was able to persuade them to embrace a latent vision God was stirring in the hearts of His people.

This inspirational and persuasive servant leader was met with the response: “Let us start rebuilding” (2:18). After analyzing what the project entailed, Nehemiah laid out the objectives and then delegated responsibilities to various teams or family groups. Each knew clearly what was expected of him or her. Thus, Nehemiah provided a lesson on motivation for the Christian leader. Motivation is about moving people toward a goal. It is most easily achieved when it meets a need in those being led, or when they can see that they are achieving the mission to which they are committed. The leader clarifies the need, giving the team a reason to celebrate what they do. The leader’s conviction can be very compelling, and this conviction is heightened in followers as the leader walks the talk. Motivating other leaders is essentially looking ahead and feeding back. We do not find out until the third chapter that there were a number of people who preferred to stand back and watch rather than bend their backs to the task. It is not surprising that these were the nobles, the *adirim* (exalted), the failed leaders of the past (3:5). It was expected that Sanballat and Tobiah would create difficulties, but it is another thing altogether to have opposition from within. Despite the opposition, Nehemiah was quick to give credit to those involved in building the wall and he acknowledged the group leaders individually. He recognized the need to affirm and acknowledge the team.

Nehemiah became remarkably effective in casting the increasingly shared vision to rebuild the walls of the city. A wide cross section of the community joined in. The high priest bought into the vision, and together with other priests, he took responsibility for the building of the Sheep Gate. Seven local rulers became involved in the reconstruction, as did a perfume maker, a city guard, goldsmiths and merchants, as well as Levites and other priests. All of these people were acknowledged by name for their involvement.

The Nehemiah model is one that is endorsed by the respected and admired founder of the Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels. He believes that the church is the most leadership-intensive enterprise in our society. It is his contention that positional leadership does not work in organizations staffed by volunteers. Leaders in churches have only their influence to make things happen. They cannot force people to follow or buy into their dreams, but under the power of the Holy Spirit, they can nudge people toward their vision and the mission of the church.⁸ Nehemiah's life testifies to the truth of this proposition.

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH

It is amazing what a leader can achieve when he or she is happy to share the credit. This adage is especially true when the leader does not mind who gets the credit. Nehemiah was a servant who became a leader of leaders who then merged with a company of leaders.

Focusing on a contagious, God-given, heart-stirring vision with other servant leaders is very different from the role of a company CEO to whom others are answerable. Unlike the role of a corporate CEO, church leaders face a great challenge: most frequently they lead volunteers. The process of seeking a God-given shared vision, then articulating it effectively in an environment of volunteer leaders, is one of prayerful submission, careful listening, challenging the community to openness and negotiation. All leaders discover that a variety of personal agendas generate alternate visions when a group of talented leaders come together. Nehemiah had to submit his impression of the vision to rebuild first to God that he might understand God's will for the community. His submission required the joining of the spiritual qualities of a servant, respect for the body of God's people, the relational skills of a diplomat, and intensive strategic corporate and one-on-one conversations as he sought to help others to adopt and own the vision.⁹

Often the *servant of servants*—a term that describes Nehemiah's calling and ours—will be viewed as the one responsible for merely oiling the machinery: maintaining the organization so that other people can get the job done. But a key role of the servant leader is

to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. It means bringing together multiple talents and building on them, a process that happens more readily when those led know they are part of a community with shared mission, values, and ideas. This process is evident as the team is involved in decision making and planning. Knowing history will enhance direction. There is evidence of this cooperative decision-making process in chapter 3 of Nehemiah as the diverse groups pull together to realize the vision. Nehemiah knows the power of *team*, and his actions reflect the reality that “No one of us is as smart as all of us!”

Reflect for a moment on Nehemiah’s timeless demonstration of the power of team and how he went about forming teams. The effective team is built on the premise that everyone has something valuable to contribute and will do so, if the environment is right. Hence an effective team needs to have a clear purpose that it knows can best be met by using the skills and abilities of all the members of the group. The team will develop a sense of ownership if it is empowered and given the flexibility to look at the task in a creative way, and if the team members are nurtured to increase the variety and depth of their skills.

It is a basic proposition of the Bible that people have a great deal of potential, and Paul makes it clear that each person has something worthwhile and important to offer to the growth and health of the church (1 Cor. 12). Each individual has much more to offer than many in leadership realize. The servant leader’s task is to create an environment that is safe, nurturing, and, through empowerment, one that encourages contributions from all members. Empowerment is the key—the driving force behind successful teams. There is a powerful interplay among empowerment, team satisfaction, and task performance.

Wellbourn puts his finger on an important factor when he says, “In principle, team based organizations and formal bureaucracies are incompatible. Teams work on group processes, whereas bureaucracies work on the basis of individuals giving instruction to other individuals. Therefore, an attempt by senior management to gain the benefits of teamwork without changing the system that supports individualism is likely to fail.”¹⁰ Nehemiah does not try to pull

rank; in fact, he does not use the power invested in him by the king to make things happen but rather repeatedly casts the shared vision and inspires the team. “The success attending Nehemiah’s efforts shows what prayer, faith, and wise, energetic action will accomplish. Living faith will prompt to energetic action. The spirit manifested by the leader will be, to a great extent, reflected by the people.”¹¹

As the wall began to grow, so did the opposition, and lives were threatened (4:1). When the wall reached half its final height, the people had almost unstoppable momentum, but the opposition embraced open warfare, and Nehemiah’s enemies attacked a number of places at once. Yet his rallying call instilled courage: “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes” (4:14). He did not just use inspirational words; rather, he did the hard, sacrificial work of coordinating working parties into fighting groups. Shields and soldiers protected the stonemasons. Trumpets were used to indicate when the fighting became too intense in one place and reinforcements were needed. An expectation of the servant of servants is that that leader will have a loyalty and duty to care for those he or she is leading.¹²

John F. Kennedy said, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”¹³ In fact the word *educate* comes from the Latin *educere*—“to lead forth.” It is a crucial task of the servant leader to educate. The education process involves understanding where growth needs to take place and how to build on the strengths that already exist. The process often means creating a learning context in which the leader can take the group on a journey of discovery. At other times, a one-on-one learning experience rather than group instruction may have advantages including dealing with power blocks by isolating the power group. The leadership challenge requires careful consideration of how learning can proceed in order to invite genuine participation and engagement. Nehemiah invited many of the troubled and the troublemakers to his table and here sought to engage and reeducate. He was not just passionate about wall building—the main task—but he was also concerned about social justice. He related his anger about the way some were treating the poor in the community (5:6), and he responded, not only with words,

but also with decisive action. As a servant leader, Nehemiah sought transformation in his colleagues and his community.

Nehemiah shows us what singleness of purpose can achieve. He did not stop to deal with external opposition. He started with the end in mind. But as he witnessed the internal damage being done, he was prepared to deal with an issue that could destroy the project. Some of the wealthier people were profiting by selling food to the poorer families involved in the building project, and many poor folk had to sell their families into slavery simply to pay the resulting obligations. Nehemiah was not naïve. He confronted the business practices of those taking advantage of the poor, and he brought an end to the practice of charging interest. “Learning is the essential fuel of the leader, the source of continually sparking new understanding, new ideas and new challenges. Very simply, those who do not learn do not long survive as leaders.”¹⁴

The most often quoted words of Nehemiah come in the final days of the wall building. He did not slacken the pace or ease off the task. When his enemies sought to entice him away from his mission, he thundered, “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” (6:3). The pressure intensified as he was told of the conspiracy afoot to destroy him. A remarkable scenario unfolds in the biblical narrative. A planted and treacherous informer encouraged Nehemiah to run to the Temple for safety—when in fact an assassin waited there to take his life and end the work. His response was memorable: “Should such a man as I flee? And who *is there* such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!” (6:11, NKJV, emphasis added). Nehemiah’s account reveals that Eliashib the priest (some believe the high priest) later actually provided a room in the temple courts to Tobiah, Nehemiah’s nemesis. Nehemiah carried out his work in the midst of treachery that likely included the cooperation of the temple leaders.

Foresight demands that leaders understand the past, engage the future, and remove their blinders in order to develop creativity. Nehemiah achieved what was apparently impossible: The wall was completed in fifty-two days! Demonstrating a servant’s heart, he took none of the glory but declared, “And it happened, when all our

enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God” (6:16, NKJV). He takes none of the glory for himself but ensures that it is given to God.

Ken Blanchard asserts, “Leaders who are servants first will assume leadership only if they see it as the best way to serve. They are called to lead, rather than driven, because they naturally want to be helpful. They aren’t possessive about their position. They view it as an act of stewardship, rather than ownership.”¹⁵ We see that Nehemiah was committed to the growth of the people as well as convinced that he was doing more than just building a wall.

The last half of the book is the record of *people building*. The administrative tasks of building, managing the project, were carried out to accomplish the purposes of the people. As with leadership, managing is done for people, not for the sake of controlling them.

With the traditional pyramid, the boss is always responsible and the staff are supposed to be responsive to the boss. When you turn the pyramid upside down, those roles get reversed. Your people become responsible and the job of management is to be responsive to their people. That creates a very different environment for implementation. If you work for your people, then what is the purpose of being a manager? To help them accomplish their goals. Your job is to help them win.¹⁶

Indeed Nehemiah began the work knowing only that at its completion he would return to Persia. He was committed to leave the city wall completed and in the control of those who built it.

The community around the servant leader is enriched by his or her leadership both in the organization where he or she serves and within the wider world around them. There is a real hunger for community, and when people find it, they will do all they can to remain within it. Real community is contagious. Being part of a community and doing a good job are seen as more important by workers in an organization than getting ahead or making a good living. “The values and interests of freedom, self-actualization, learning, community, excellence, uniqueness, service, and social responsibility truly attract people.”¹⁷ Nehemiah successfully negotiated the process to create and

foster community. He was not tempted to settle for pseudo-community. Chaos visited the building group as different agendas arose, but the willingness of Nehemiah to empty himself of self-interest created a new paradigm that gave rise to true community.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to change, the leader has the choice to be either transactional (political and incremental in approach), or transformational, and this choice will inform him or her in the process of personal change as well as organizational change. Nehemiah is a transformational leader who “attends to the future, remains up-to-date with emerging trends, focuses on purpose and direction, and communicates a sense of where the company will be over the long term. In the motivator role...[he] attends to commitment, emphasizes...values, challenges people with new goals and aspirations, and creates a sense of excitement.”¹⁸ After Nehemiah completed the wall, he then set about to rebuild the nation through reformation and revival. This process of change is described in the final chapter of the book, as Nehemiah walks forward in obedience to God, with *faith and courage*. Both are essential qualities of effective leaders.

Agreeing with the wisdom of Nehemiah, Robert Quinn made the following insightful statement: “The land of excellence is safely guarded from unworthy intruders. At the gates stand two fearsome sentries—risk and learning. The keys to entrance are faith and courage.”¹⁹ Transformational leaders are willing to risk and then to learn from both their successes and failures. Nehemiah demonstrates that to move toward real change there has to be an unswerving faith in the direction (vision) and courage to stay the course despite opposition.

We can learn much from the life of Nehemiah, and this learning lends credence to George Weber’s assertion: “The successful leader of the future must have one more attribute that weighs perhaps as much as all the others on the scale of effectiveness; he or she must be a tireless, inventive, observant, risk-taking, and ever-hopeful builder and enabler of management and leadership teams within and among the organization’s constituent parts.”²⁰

Nehemiah epitomizes the truth of the following statement: “The future is not a result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created, first in mind, next in will, then in activity. The future is not some place we are going to, but a place we are creating. The paths are not to be discovered, but made: and the activity of making the future changes both the maker and the destination.”²¹ Servant leaders dream, then believe enough to see the dream become reality.

FOR REFLECTION

Personal:

1. Nehemiah’s discourse with the king was undergirded by four months of prayer and petition to God. What inferences can you make about Nehemiah and your own spiritual life?
2. Servant leaders assume positions of leadership when they perceive that position affords them the best capacity to serve. How have you personally discerned that your position is the best way for you to serve others?

Organizational:

1. Nehemiah honestly assessed the situation and its corresponding challenges. How does your organization approach the process of assessment and planning?
2. Nehemiah’s effective leadership was evident in his singleness of purpose as he overcame external opposition that threatened to deter him. How does your organization react to challenges?

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 13–14.
2. There are some commentators who believe that the position of cupbearer was one of privilege and not of slavery since Nehemiah’s brother, Hanani, was the one who shared the news of Jerusalem after returning from a visit there. Yet the language that Nehemiah uses in the first seven chapters is rough and coarse. This

leads many commentators to the conclusion that he was not well educated, which lends credence to the idea that he was in fact a slave.

3. John White, *Excellence in Leadership: The Pattern of Nehemiah* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 23.

4. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from the New International Version.

5. Scripture references are taken from the book of Nehemiah unless noted otherwise.

6. Larry C. Spears and Michele Lawrence, eds., *Practicing Servant Leadership: Succeeding through Trust, Bravery, and Forgiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 9–24.

7. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 150.

8. John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 18.

9. For an excellent guide on how to lead leaders, see Jeswald W. Salacuse, *Leading Leaders: How to Manage Smart, Talented, Rich and Powerful People* (New York: AMACOM, 2006).

10. Michael Wellbourn, *Understanding Teams* (Frenchs Forest, NSW: Prentice Hall, 2001), 138.

11. Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Assoc., 2009), 177.

12. Salacuse, *Leading Leaders*, 131.

13. Salacuse, *Leading Leaders*, 131.

14. W. Bennis and B. Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985), quoted in Spears and Lawrence, *Practicing Servant Leadership*, 148.

15. Ken Blanchard, *Leadership by the Book: Tools to Transform Your Workplace* (New York: Random House, 1999), 42.

16. Ken Blanchard, “Servant-Leadership Revisited” in *Insights on Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), 25.

17. Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 152.

18. Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 149.

19. Quinn, *Deep Change*, 165.

20. George B. Weber, “Growing Tomorrow’s Leaders” in *The Leader of the Future*, ed. Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, and Richard Beckhard (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 309 quoted in Kenneth O. Gangel, *Team Leadership in Christian Ministry* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 15–16.

21. Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick, *Assessment in the Learning Organization* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995), quoted in Gwendolyn Hallsmith, *The Key to Sustainable Cities: Meeting Human Needs: Transforming Community Systems* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003), 215.