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Cover Page Footnote

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WHAT MADE NEHEMIAH AN EFFECTIVE LEADER?

Abstract: Nehemiah, whose role changed from that of royal cupbearer to governor of Judah, utilized multiple leadership strategies in accomplishing his goal of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. His work was accomplished through an active prayer life, providing a vision to his followers, using his closeness to King Artaxerxes to receive help, role modeling, adaptability, and foresight. Furthermore, Nehemiah paid close attention to his followers' needs, and was tenacious in accomplishing his goals. This document describes Nehemiah's utilization of these primarily transformational leadership strategies. It also offers contemporary Christian leaders an effective leadership role model.

Keywords: *Nehemiah, leadership theory, leadership strategies, biblical leadership, transformational leadership*

Nehemiah held the servant role of cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of the Persian court in the capital city of Susa (Rendtorff, 1991). In the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, his brother Hanani visited him. Nehemiah learned from Hanani that the Jews who survived captivity were quite distraught because the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and its gates were ruined by fire (Neh. 1:1–3, NIV). This essay will describe the leadership strategies that Nehemiah utilized once this information was learned.

Nehemiah's Leadership Strategies

The book of Nehemiah provides an early case study in strategic management. Nehemiah was armed with an eclectic array of leadership strategies, ranging from prayer to perseverance. A selection of these strategies, many of which belong to the transformational leader, will be explained and evaluated below.

Prayer

According to Clinton (1993), "at the heart of leadership is communication between God and the leader. A leader must know God's purposes for a group

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before he can communicate them” (p. 7). Upon receiving word of the exiled Jews’ distress, Nehemiah immediately asked God for discernment. In Nehemiah 1:4, it is written, “When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.” By praying and fasting before taking on such a monumental task, he was able to seek the counsel of the Almighty prior to embarking on the responsibility of assisting the Israelites. Nehemiah realized that “prayer is a necessary leadership habit that enhances communication with God and secures vision for ministry” (Clinton, 1993, p. 7).

While in the presence of King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah prayed before responding to the king’s question of what he wanted. It was immediately following this prayer that Nehemiah received his vision for the ministry. He answered Artaxerxes, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it” (Neh. 2:5).

Of course, Nehemiah did not end his prayers after receiving his vision for the restored future of Jerusalem. Rather, he continued to ask God for guidance and help throughout the journey. Nehemiah received his power through God, the source of all power and might. The entire restructuring of Jerusalem was enveloped in the power of prayer, as evidenced in how often prayers are lifted up within the relatively short book of Nehemiah. How many prayers are mentioned? Twelve (Hoffeditz, 2005). That is substantial, when keeping in mind the book’s brevity. Now consider this. Of those twelve prayers, Nehemiah himself voiced ten. Two of these ten were mentioned above, four were “prayed when seeking to restore the spiritual health and practices of the people of Israel,” and four more were spoken “when the people of Israel were being mocked or opposed in their work” (Scott, 2014, p. 2).

Of all the vital strategies Nehemiah employed, prayer remains the first and foremost, which is why it is intentionally listed first in this essay. It is only through our relationship with God that we are capable of reaching our true purpose. In the timeless words of St. Augustine of Hippo, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until we rest in Thee” (as cited in Marshall, 2001, p. 18).

Provide a Vision

Northouse (2013) describes transformational leaders as individuals who have “a clear vision of the future state of their organizations” (p. 197). This vision helps direct followers toward a common goal and empowers them with knowledge that they form a vital component serving to accomplish that goal. Once Nehemiah had his vision in mind, he clearly communicated it to others.

As Stanley (1999) recommends, “communicate [the] vision as a solution to a problem that must be addressed immediately” (p. 86). Hence, the problem of the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem and the disgrace felt by the survivors of the exile would be solved by Nehemiah’s vision of rebuilding those walls.

This vision was not merely stated to King Artaxerxes, but to the people of Jerusalem, of whom he garnered support. Three days after arriving in Jerusalem, he said, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace” (Neh. 2:17). He assured them that God graced him with the plan and Artaxerxes backed him. Their response to Nehemiah’s vision was greeted positively, “Let us start rebuilding,” they proclaimed (Neh. 2:18). The people needed to hear Nehemiah’s vision, for there is truth in the words of Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Nehemiah successfully pointed the people toward the planned future goal, “energiz[ed] people and garner[ed] commitment,” gave them “meaning to work, and establishe[d] a standard of excellence” (Hickman, 2010, p. 513).

Leveraging Power

According to Pearce and Robinson (2013), effective leaders “make use of all . . . sources of power and influence . . . to deal with the myriad of situations they face and need others to handle” (p. 367). Nehemiah’s position as the royal cupbearer to King Artaxerxes allowed him the ability to “exercise influence on a king’s policies” (Coggins, 2012, p. 45). Nehemiah did what successful leaders do; he used that leveraging power to his advantage. Artaxerxes, aware that Nehemiah was a man of character and integrity, granted his requests to return to Judah, as well as giving him “letters of reference and a government grant for building materials” (Aryee, 2009, p. 1).

Foresight

The requests of letters for the “governors of Trans-Euphrates” and for “Asaph, keeper of the royal park” (Neh. 2:7-8), demonstrated forward-thinking strategic management acumen. Schwartz (2010) referred to this type of preparation for the future as “strategic conversations” that take place to “observe and interpret the interaction of forces that might affect you, your enterprises, and your communities” (p. 10). By evaluating possible risks ahead of time, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem prepared for the task at hand.

Attending to Followers’ Needs

Transformational leadership involves the process of interaction between

followers and the leader (Northouse, 2013). Specifically, the transformational leader attends to the “followers’ needs, values, and morals” (p. 201). Additionally, the charismatic transformational leader arises “in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, [or] political distress” (Weber, 1968, as cited in Antonakis, 2012, p. 260). With this information, one can observe that Nehemiah epitomized the transformational leader. He cared deeply for the concerns of the people; his entire vision was catalyzed upon hearing of the distress of the postexilic people of Jerusalem and Judah. Nehemiah not only set out to rebuild the walls so “proper worship of God” could be restored (Scott, 2014, p. 2), but also “rescued the poor from oppression and slavery,” refusing “to receive his lawful allowance from the people while as governor,” and caring for their moral and spiritual needs by addressing the issue of intermarriage (Coggins, 2012, p. 46).

Idealized Influence

“Albert Bandura and Richard Walters have shown that behavior is learned not only by conditioning but by imitating persons with whom the learner identifies and whom he takes as models” (Burns, 1978, p. 63). This role modeling is yet another component of transformational leaders, and is referred to as idealized influence in particular leadership theory. Transformational leaders’ followers emulate their leaders with idealized influence because they can identify with them. The followers also appreciate that the leaders “have very high standards of moral and ethical conduct and can be counted on to do the right thing” (Northouse, 2013, p. 191).

Nehemiah provided a positive role model for the postexilic people of Jerusalem and Judah. As governor of Jerusalem, he was rewarded with a governor’s allowance. He did not hoard material goods for himself; rather, he shared with the many poor around him. He provided them with food, as they had difficulty providing for their families. As Nehemiah 5:17–18 describes:

A hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. . . . I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

Generosity was not the only behavior that served as an important model to the people. As addressed previously, Nehemiah also committed himself to God and His holy Word. He protected his people from physical harm (Neh. 4:10) and those who tried to cheat them (Neh. 5:8-9). He held fast to the laws of the Word. His work ethic was strong as well. He easily could have delegated all work to his followers, yet he labored at the task alongside them (Neh. 5:16). By taking on the position as role model, he became the type of leader who

“knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way” (Maxwell, as cited in Palmieri, 2009, p. 21).

Adaptability

The best leaders adapt well to change and opposition. According to Pearce and Robinson (2013), “the dynamic strategic planning process must be monitored constantly for significant shifts” (p. 17). By listening to his people, Nehemiah stayed abreast of changes and adapted readily and effectively. When apprised of the external threats from enemies, such as Sanballat, the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, Nehemiah first prayed, as was typically his first line of defense against adversaries. Then, he developed a plan to station guards at the points of highest risk, dividing the workforce into guards and construction workers. He also communicated with his people the fact that God remained with them and would see them through (Neh. 4:1-14). Most spiritual leaders will face opposition in trying to accomplish the will of God. These leaders have to “welcome conflict as a heart-shaping tool of God” (McNeal, 200, p. 156). Nehemiah was ready for the conflict and his protective plan allowed the work to get accomplished. In doing so, he proved himself a great leader. A true test of great leadership is “the ability to recognize a problem before it becomes an emergency” (Maxwell, 1993, p. 81). Nehemiah averted a looming crisis by paying attention to his external threats.

Perseverance

While many stop trying to reach a goal when troubles arise, those who persevere continue on in order to “see a commitment through to completion” (Pearce & Robinson, 2013, p. 359). Despite the opposition from adversaries described in the aforementioned paragraph, Nehemiah persevered. In fact, he showed tenacity throughout the entire project. For example, Nehemiah could have easily listened to his brother Hanani explain about the distress of the postexilic Jews and, while wanting to do something about it, convince himself that he did not have the opportunity to accomplish the task of rebuilding since he already had a responsibility as cupbearer to Artaxerxes. Instead, he persevered with the vision of the reconstruction by requesting a leave of absence from his duties. He also was steadfast when disgruntled Jews complained of their fellow Jews charging them interest (Neh. 5:1-13). When further opposition came from Sanballat and Geshem plotting against him, Nehemiah pursued onward with the task at hand, not allowing them to veer him off his focus. The same held true when prophets like Noadiah attempted to intimidate Nehemiah. His attention to his work and people never failed (Neh. 6:1-14). The perseverance paid off. In a mere fifty-two days, the wall was

complete. His vision became reality on the twenty-fifth day of Alul (Neh. 6:15).

Conclusion

Nehemiah, a rather ordinary person in a servant position, became a transformational leader when apprised of the discontent of the postexilic Jews in Jerusalem and Judah. By praying to God for discernment of His holy will, Nehemiah followed God's calling to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem. In doing so, he enacted various leadership strategies in addition to the one that came most naturally to him as a devout man of faith; namely, prayer to his maker and provider. The additional strategies employed included those that define the transformational leader: providing a vision, idealized influence, and attending to followers' needs. Other leadership techniques Nehemiah used were adaptability, foresight, leveraging power, and a plethora of perseverance. Using those strategies, Nehemiah was able to witness the completion of his vision. The walls were restored in a mere fifty-two days.

Nehemiah offers a leadership lesson for all. Some, if not all, of the aforementioned strategies can be incorporated into the contemporary workplace. And like Nehemiah, the first step in the leadership journey starts with prayer.

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