

Why Should Anyone Follow You?

by Herta von Stiegel



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This talk, given as a CABE Network paper, encourages us to follow Nehemiah's example of perseverance and inspiration of others as a model of leadership.

Why Should Anyone Be Led by YOU? is the challenging title of a book by Professors Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones. The subtitle "What It Takes to Be an Authentic Leader" is holding out some hope for those of us who are tired of lamenting about the leadership vacuum at the highest levels of business, politics and religious organizations. According to Goffee and Jones "What organizations need – and what followers want – are authentic leaders who know who they are, where the organization needs to go, and how to convince followers to help them get there." But what is an authentic leader? How do you become an authentic leader? According to these authors "Be yourself more – with skill."

This is very good advice and there are of course many helpful books on leadership in general and Christian leadership in particular. For me the best leadership manual is the Bible, and the dusty Old Testament

book of Nehemiah is the seminal treatment of the subject. What does Nehemiah, the Jewish cupbearer of the powerful Persian king Artaxerxes, have to teach us about Christian leadership in the 21st century? Quite a bit! In fact, I would encourage you to stop reading this article for the moment and quickly read the book of Nehemiah. It will be time well spent.

A study of Nehemiah highlights six major hallmarks of a great leader.

1. Self-knowledge

A leader has a deep understanding of who he or she is in relation to God and our fellow human beings. This includes understanding and being comfortable with our roots because we are shaped by our history and the better we understand where we come from the more effective we can be. Embracing our background, no matter how difficult, shameful or tragic, is essential to being an authentic leader.

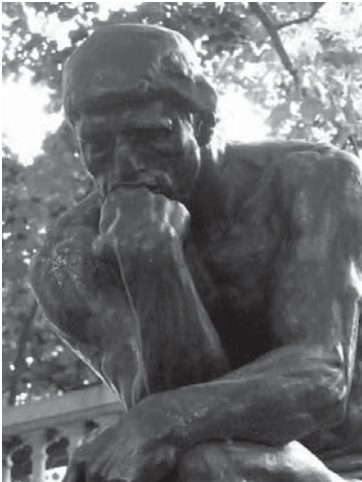
2. Availability

A leader must have a clear recognition of the need at hand. In Nehemiah's case, Jerusalem is in ruins. The city of his fathers and of his God needs to be rebuilt. It is in a terrible mess, and this causes Nehemiah to weep! (Neh.1:1-4) Over what do you weep? Is there a social condition so devastating that it causes you to weep? So often we weep out of self-pity but the weeping that catapults us into action is on behalf of others, for causes much greater than ourselves. But a recognition of a need that drives us to tears leads to nothing unless we are willing to make ourselves available. Nehemiah goes to God and makes himself available to meet the need. "Here I am, Lord - ready and willing!"

3. Strategic Planning

A leader must use time wisely in preparation and planning. After Nehemiah identifies the need, prays about it and decides to

become part of the solution, he waits for four months until the king opens the door for Nehemiah to present his request (Neh.2:1-8). The time is spent, not in idle hopefulness, but by formulating a clear plan of action. So when the king opens the door, Nehemiah is ready with his proposal. He knows exactly what he needs from the king to make things happen. Nehemiah knows that only God can change the king's heart but, while waiting for God to answer, he thinks, plans and strategises. Great leaders plan carefully during times when nothing seems to happen and therefore handle authority wisely. Christian leaders should not use prayer as an excuse for an



■ *Christian leaders should not use prayer as an excuse for an absence of intelligent thought*

absence of intelligent thought. God will always do his part if we use the talents he has given us to do ours!

4. Empowering People

According to Dr. John Maxwell, leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less. In a seminar I attended, Maxwell said, “He who

thinks he leads but has no followers, is only taking a walk.” Great leaders know how to empower people. They reveal what is necessary but not too much. Sometimes we may have a brilliant idea but if it is not fully thought through, people will generally not follow, at least not beyond the initial euphoria phase. Nehemiah understands this principle very well. When he arrives in Jerusalem he tells no one what he plans to do. He spends three days testing his theory on the ground. Only when he is satisfied that the plan is workable, does he bring the people together. He shares his strategy but he also shares his story (Neh.2:17-18). He, Nehemiah, is persuaded that God is the author of this mission because God has answered Nehemiah's prayers. Nehemiah can motivate the people because of his personal experience with God. It is Nehemiah's story! It is personal and authentic. Borrowed stories don't motivate. Great leaders draw on their own relationship with God and appeal to the most basic needs of people. Nehemiah understands the art of intrinsic motivation and calls on the people to arise and rebuild their city.

5. Handling Criticism and Opposition

Anyone who steps into the arena of leadership must be prepared for criticism. Be encouraged: no statue has ever been erected in honour of a critic! Critics are seldom alone; they have a way of running at least in groups of three, like the Number 6 bus outside my door in Central

London! Nehemiah is confronted by his three critics, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, time and again (see Neh.2:19-20, 4:1-9, 6:1-9). But he decides to deal with the opposition in two ways: he takes his setbacks to God in prayer and he stays the course. He and the people continue to build in spite of ridicule, threats, false accusations and subterfuge.



■ *Estelle Morris, who resigned as Education Secretary feeling unable to deal with Media criticism*

Great leaders learn to accept criticism as a price of leadership; they sift through it to recognise whether it is constructive, ignore what is unhelpful and move forward. They learn to choose their battles carefully. Not every challenge needs to be faced head on! Most of them can be avoided. Great leaders save their energy for the battles that really need to be fought and avoid the ones that can be avoided.

6. Finding ways for the team to win

There is nothing more motivating than a finished project. In Nehemiah's case, they work under the most trying conditions, but they finish the wall, in a mere 52 days! (Neh.6:15) Nehemiah has

made sure that the people are organised in support groups so they can encourage each other when they are tempted to quit (Neh.4:15-23). Nehemiah knows that you are only as good as the people around you. When they finish the wall, Nehemiah calls for a major celebration. Great leaders know that the people around us determine the level of our success. So, the first thing is to choose the team wisely; then create a systemic support system; deal with setbacks realistically and celebrate success! Vision will carry a leader for a while but people will continue to follow only



■ Herta, Hans and their Guide Elloy on top of Kilimanjaro ■

when they see results and only when they benefit from the realisation of the vision. A well articulated vision is essential but it will materialise only if the team adopt it and work to accomplish it for every one's benefit!

I had the opportunity to put these timeless principles into practice as chair of the Enham Kilimanjaro Challenge (the "Kili Challenge"). On July 12, 2008 I stood with my husband and three disabled climbers with their non-disabled "buddies" on the roof of Africa! Believed to be the first multi-ability and multi-national team to

summit Mt. Kilimanjaro, we reached Uhuru Peak at 5,895 meters (19,345 ft), the highest point of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Bright sunshine, clouds beneath us, snow under our feet, glaciers in front of us and the curvature of the earth on the far horizon - it was magic!!

I developed this idea while running on a treadmill in my gym at Lord's for two reasons: to raise the profile of Enham, a major UK disability charity, and to demonstrate that we can do more together than any one of us separately. It was a very successful climb in statistical

terms as 16 out of a group of 28 reached the summit. (The success rate for the scenic but difficult Machame Route which we took is around 35%.) This turned out to be a logistical feat with a 30 person team that included two expedition leaders, a six person film crew, three medical doctors and a 180 person support team. It was truly an unforgettable experience! I very much hope that the film we commissioned entitled "The Mountain Within" will capture some of the richness of what we saw, felt and achieved.

Personally, I learned so much from leading the Kili Challenge. I agree with Bill Hybels that churches and other volunteer organizations are the most leadership-intensive enterprises in society. If you can lead successfully in a volunteer setting, you can lead anywhere. I learned about the joy of making myself

available when I could not possibly imagine fitting such a project into my packed diary. I experienced again that prayer, although very important, is not a substitute for strategic planning. While watching our guide Elloy I learned that you don't have to climb over every boulder – go around it if you can and save your energy for the big ones. And when I stood on top of Africa, all the criticism and difficulties were forgotten. I felt elation in seeing so many of us succeed and all those who did had a buddy! The people around you do indeed determine the level of your success.

Nehemiah is one of my heroes. I can identify with him because he is the man in the trenches who inspires and challenges us to persevere when we want to quit. He reminds us that great leaders stay the course and great things are achieved one brick at a time; one step at a time! ■

Herta von Stiegel is executive chairman of Ariya Capital Group, a fund management firm focusing on sustainable investments in Africa. She has over 20 years experience in international finance and practised law prior to becoming a banker. She was Managing Director at AIG Financial Products and held senior positions at Citibank and JP Morgan. She serves on several boards in the corporate and not-for-profit sectors, including Camco International and Opportunity International. She chairs the Prince's Trust Women's Leadership Group and is a member of the Women's Leadership Board of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.