

Learning the lessons of leadership early

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A story is told of an event at the Paraplegic Games. It was late in the day, and the 400 metre race was about to start. Two young men lined up on the starting line, all the other competitors had dropped out. A hard-bitten *Time* magazine reporter gave his commentary on the radio, describing the scene as 'painful to watch'. The gun went off. The two men, both with cerebral palsy lurched off the line. One of the coaches ran beside the track, coaxing his athlete on. 'Come on Joey, you can win.' At the first corner Joey was 25 metres in front, a subtle chant came from the crowd: 'Joey, Joey, Joey'. Coming into the last turn, Joey's lead had stretched to 40 metres. The other competitor was weary and losing heart. Thirty metres from the finishing line, Joey suddenly stopped. He turned to his coach and smiled, acknowledged the crowd, and then turned back to the other young man and said, 'Come on, buddy.' Joey held out his hand until the man was alongside him and then they ran across the line together. The crowd went berserk. The reporter was heard to utter, 'Make me more like Joey.' The coach was heard to stammer through his tear-stained face, 'Attaboy Joey, you're a real winner!'

Being a leader of a church is tough, particularly at this time of great change within society and church. Many leaders are unsure of their role and feel inadequately trained to fulfil it. Reports such as *Affirmation and Accountability*, and *Leaders Under Pressure* highlight some of the current pressures experiences by church leaders:

- 3 in 10 have felt for a prolonged period like leaving Christian service
- 3 in 10 feel their family suffers because of their work
- 7 in 10 feel heavily overworked
- 200 church leaders miss Sunday activities each week as a result of stress related illnesses.
- 1,500 church leaders quit over a 10 year period.

Over the past 10 years three things have fuelled my concern about training leaders; firstly my own personal journey. At 17 I was leading the Youth Group in my local church, by 19 I was at Bible College and at 26 I was the pastor of a local church. I love leading a church; I've made lots of mistakes and learned loads. Secondly, I started reading widely on the subject of leadership and discovered authors saying similar things. In particular was the "need for a new kind of leadership." Models of leadership and church that have worked well in the past are being challenged and new models are emerging in order to engage with a rapidly changing world. Thirdly I have been involved in the releasing and equipping of young leaders. In Chester I have been working with many young leaders in their 20's who are looking for opportunities to lead within a strong relational context where they can be accountable and find support.

As I reflect on the need to train leaders I believe we need to concentrate on 5 key aspects – the leader as a disciple; the character of a leader; the call of God on a leader; the cultivating of competence in the leader and the leader as part of a team.

The leader as a disciple

In my experience it is very easy for those of who are paid to lead a church to slip into "doing a job" We lose sight of the truth that our leadership flows from our "followership." We are to be followers of Jesus Christ first and foremost which means primarily we are disciples. Our personal relationship with Jesus needs to be kept alive, the love

we have for God and His people can quickly be squashed and lost by the pressures of leading. In helping to develop an emerging leader we must emphasize that the leadership exercised flows from our position 'in Christ.' Our identity is crucial; if we don't settle the question of who we are 'in Christ', then we will always struggle in what we do for Christ.

The character of a leader

We set young leaders up for a fall if we encourage them to envision what they can do before we consider the kind of person they should be! In today's society the issue of trust in leadership is paramount, the loss of trust in institutional leadership - for example in the world of politics - is seen clearly in the 20's and 30's who have disengaged because they don't trust what is being said by those in leadership. Trust has to be earned; we can't just expect people to give it to us. For me this is the biggest challenge in developing leaders – because it isn't a quick fix, instant thing. Qualities such as authenticity, integrity and vulnerability all build the sense of trust that we need if we are going to lead.

As leaders we need to show people how to follow Jesus not just tell people. The area of modelling, (not the cat walk type!) challenges me in my role as a leader. Yet I cannot hide from the fact that people are watching my life and my leadership. Bill Hybels defines character as "who you are when no one else is looking" We must connect the public and private life; problems usually occur when we separate them. Our character is expressed under pressure: it is when a crisis comes along that we really see what our character is like so we must prepare ourselves for that moment of pressure. One final thought – don't ignore the small things in your life, they will have potential to grow into big things; if we observe and reflect on these then we can act and change before it becomes much harder to do so.

The call of God on a leader

The issue of time or more specifically not having enough time is one that all leaders face. I belong to a number of networks of church leaders and I can pretty much guarantee that everyone I speak to will complain that they are too busy. The pace of modern life, the multiple demands from people, the pressures created by modern communications and the complexities of Christian leadership leave many of us breathless. I am aware in my own life that I can hide behind the issue of being busy so that I don't answer the question of being productive. It is important for me to keep asking the question, 'What is it that God is calling me to do?' As I reflect on this I can respond to God's particular purpose for my life?

Leaders need to know the call of God in order to be able to prioritise their time. Over the recent few years I have had to reassess my own priorities as the leader of my church, changes in my personal circumstance, the addition of new staff, the growth with the church, the invitations to do stuff outside of the local church has all meant that I need to reassess the call of God on my life. If I know God has a unique and particular purpose for me then it enables me to stop doing some things, give more time to other areas and have the ability to add new responsibilities and still have time off!!

The cultivating of competence of the leader

If we want to release younger men and women into leadership then we must take the time to invest in them. Over the years a wide variety of people have developed and grown me as a leader, for this I am deeply grateful. It has also given me a heightened awareness of the responsibility on me to invest in the next generation. At the moment I am involved in investing my time in eight individuals who are in their 20's and 30's.

Within Mainstream I am developing the “Imprint Conference” an annual event for 20 somethings to come together over a weekend for input, networking and encouragement for their leadership. In each one of the people I meet with I am looking for four key things: humility, faith, gratitude and servant-heartedness. When I see them in a person then I know that in time a leader can emerge. Giving young leaders exposure and experience is a risky thing but an environment for this to happen must be part of our churches and within Mainstream!

The leader in a team

Leadership in the New Testament is always plural yet many leaders I meet in churches are very lonely and isolated. I believe we must develop new models for leaders to grow where we have a clearer context for expressing our leadership – one of community, team, interrelatedness and interdependence. I am so grateful that within my church and in the city I live I have some very good friendships with others who are in leadership with me. Developing leadership in teams provides a safe place to grow as a leader, where the temptation to abuse power or go it alone can be held in check, edges are rubbed off and pride is reduced through the sharing of results.

Much of this article is adapted from a book by James Lawrence “Growing Leaders.” I would highly recommend the reading of this book to develop some of the concepts in the article.