

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Leadership

Like nearly all missionaries, at some time or other you are in a position of leadership: planting churches, directing a work team, or teaching in school (or Sunday school, or English). You may feel pressure from above to reach goals and pressure from below to help those you supervise meet their needs. What are you to do? In such a position of leadership, Nehemiah gives good answers. Who was Nehemiah? What did he do? How did he lead? When did he lead? Why did he lead? Did he succeed? Although not everyone has the same style and uses the same methods, let us consider Nehemiah as one example of Godly leadership.

Who was Nehemiah?

Like missionaries, Nehemiah was living in another culture, working in a position of responsibility there. He was cupbearer to the king. When visitors arrived from his passport country, he inquired about the people back home and about the capitol city. However, much more important than his occupational title were his personal characteristics. When he heard that the people back home were disgraced and the walls of the city were burned and broken, he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed.

He was:

- Compassionate. He wept and mourned for his people and his country.
- Caring. He fasted, prayed and took action, encouraging the people.
- Committed. He got the job done, cared for his people, and was faithful to God.

- Consistent. Even those he reprimanded could find nothing negative to say about him.
- Courageous. He persevered in the face of threats, ridicule, and opposition from both the outside and inside.

For nearly a century some of his people must have said, “Somebody ought to do something about those walls.” Others must have replied, “Nothing can be done.” Because of his character, Nehemiah felt responsible to take some action.

What did he do?

The most obvious answer to this is that he built the wall. Although little had been accomplished in 90 years, he had the wall completed in only 52 days, less than two months.

More important than building the wall was that, as their leader, he took care of his people. He was concerned about:

- Safety. He directed them in defending themselves from people of other cultures opposed their work.
- Justice. When people of their passport culture took advantage of them back home by charging exorbitant interest rates, Nehemiah confronted the lenders.
- Spiritual renewal. He saw that someone led his people in hearing God’s word, confession, worship, celebration, and praise.
- Consolidation of his gains. Nehemiah did not leave the capitol city nearly empty but got one in ten of the families to volunteer to live there.
- Forethought. He anticipated needs and drafted plans to avoid pitfalls.

How did he lead?

More important than being cupbearer to the king (who he was) or that he built the wall in 52 days (what he did) is how he did it. He did it all in ways that brought glory to God and a sense of fulfillment to those under his supervision. Here are some of the ways he did it:

- Prayed. After he first heard the bad news and reacted to it, we have recorded his prayer of adoration, confession, reminder of the covenant, and petition for success.
- Overcame his fears. Although he was very much afraid of what the king in the culture where he was living and working would say, he responded when asked about his problem. He knew that the king would probably not be very excited about rebuilding the capitol of a conquered nation—Nehemiah’s passport country.
- Was tactfully open to superiors. He began by appropriately addressing the king and then sharing his problem at the king’s request. He responded to each of the king’s questions by asking more and more from him, including letters of recommendation.
- Shared his vision. After deciding what should be done, he shared his vision with the local leaders in his passport country.
- Gave God the glory. From the beginning he acknowledged that his success was due to God’s grace.
- Faced ridicule. When people of other cultures mocked and ridiculed him and the people he was leading, he again affirmed his confidence in God.
- Delegated the work. He assigned people to work on various parts of the wall—often the parts in front of their own

houses. What motivation—those who did poor workmanship or did not complete their part of the wall would be the first to suffer the consequences of their lack of diligence.

- Emphasized cooperation rather than competition. He had forty distinct groups working together on a project, something of a miracle for those who have tried to get even two churches or mission agencies to work together.
- Faced opposition realistically. When the people of other cultures became incensed so that they despised and ridiculed Nehemiah’s work force, he responded with prayer and the posting of guards.
- Encouraged his workers. He acknowledged their fears and reminded them of their great awesome God.
- Developed contingency plans. He had half of the people working and the others standing guard. He further arranged for defenders to come at once to the sounding of the trumpet when those at another part of the wall were threatened.
- Confronted internal dissention. When the controversy arose over people from the home country charging the workers interest, he immediately called a large meeting to resolve the issue.
- Did not take the perks. Nehemiah did not lord it over his workers but out of reverence for God did not take even the food to which he was entitled, nor did he acquire any land.
- Kept to the task. Rather than taking the perks, he said, “Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall.” (Nehemiah 5:16)

Notice that most of the “how he did it” things were more about his character than they were about techniques for motivating his

workers to get the job done. Also note that after the wall was built Nehemiah was not the one to read God's word to the people, but he stepped aside for Ezra to do so.

When did he lead?

Nehemiah did not rush right into action as soon as he heard the bad news, but he carefully took one step at a time.

- Four months after he talked with the delegation from his passport country (the month of Kisley) he spoke with the king (the month of Nisan). During that time he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed.
- He did not leave the country where he was living without permission from the king and letters of introduction, rather like getting visas before international travel.
- He did not immediately call the people of Jerusalem together to get them working on the wall. Instead, before even telling anyone why he was there, he did a secret survey at night to get a comprehensive view of the project.
- Once the project was underway, everyone worked from dawn to dusk. There was no hesitation at that time. (Note that this schedule was for 7.5 weeks, not for a lifetime.)

Why did he lead?

Of course, part of the reason was the kind of person he was. He was a concerned, caring, compassionate person who identified deeply with his people who were hundreds of miles away in his homeland. When he heard of their trouble and disgrace, his response was to sit down, weep, and mourn.

His next responses were prayer and fasting. He went beyond merely empathizing with them and carried their problem to God over a period of several months. All Christians, including missionaries, should make this prayerful response for people in times of need.

After months of prayer he was convinced that he had to do more about the need, something that involved his personal involvement. In Nehemiah 2:12, he talked about "what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem." What a clear call from God to a specific task!

Did he succeed?

He succeeded on both counts. He completed the task to which God had called him, and he took care of his people while accomplishing the task. He not only built the wall, but he also brought about changes that would keep the wall in place for many years by restoring to the people of God their identity and giving them a common purpose

Of course, not everyone succeeds in all tasks attempted. Leaders need to be prepared for the frustration of failure even when obeying God completely. Repentance by the people did not occur under the leadership of every prophet.

This brochure is just an introduction to what this book of the Bible says about Nehemiah's leadership. If you are in a position of leadership, reading this book annually (or even more often) will serve as a regular checkup for you personally as a leader and for your style of leadership. As you study his word, God himself will emphasize what you need at that particular time.

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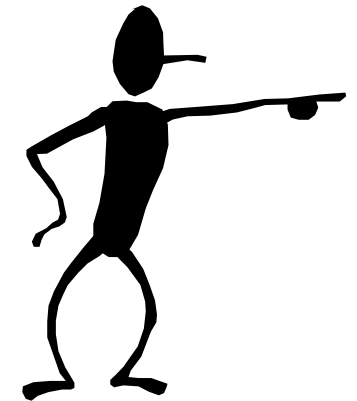
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