

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Serving under “Difficult” Leaders

Debbie had spent several years preparing for what God had called her to, teaching in a Christian international school where she could reach nationals and help other third culture kids (TCKs) like herself. However, she was disappointed by what actually happened.

Her principal was very difficult. Although she was new at the school and new to the culture, she had been given most of the problem students as well as a poor schedule. At first she thought it was just her, but she soon found out that other staff found the principal difficult as well. The principal freely gave criticisms but seldom gave compliments. Usually, when there was a disagreement with parents, the principal failed to support the teacher, even when it was obvious that the parents were wrong.

By the end of the first month of teaching Debbie was so discouraged that she began seriously considering giving up and going home, or at least not retuning next year. How could it be that such poor leadership was here where God’s work was so vital? What could be done about it?

Who are the difficult leaders?

A poor leader can be anyone who has authority over missionaries. Here are a few examples.

- Principals who supervise teachers and other staff at mission schools.
- Field directors who direct the activities of missionaries over a whole country.

- In the passport country department heads who make decisions that influence the lives of missionaries around the world.
- National church leaders who have authority over the activities of expatriate missionaries.

How did they become leaders?

They became leaders just like the good leaders did—someone thought they would do well. Unfortunately, not all leaders are good at leading. Here are some possible reasons why they became leaders.

- Years of service. People may have been put in leadership positions because they had much experience, rather than because they were good leaders.
- Need. When leadership positions opened up and someone was needed immediately, the best available person may have been given the position.
- Nepotism. A missionary may have been given the leadership position because he or she was related to someone higher up in the agency.
- Peter Principle. Missionaries outstanding in previous positions may have been “promoted” until they reached their level of incompetence, and then they stayed there for the rest of their time of service.

Are there examples in the Bible?

The Bible has two excellent examples of TCKs serving under difficult national leaders in host countries. One such example is Joseph’s service under several Egyptian leaders.

- Sold into slavery. His brothers hated him, were jealous of him, plotted to kill him,

dropped him into a cistern, and finally sold him to a passing caravan of merchants. When they reached Egypt, the merchants sold Joseph to Potiphar, captain of the guard (Genesis 37).

- Falsely accused. Although he refused her seductive attempts, Potiphar’s wife accused Joseph of attempting to rape her. He was put in prison (Genesis 39).
- Forgotten. While in prison Joseph correctly interpreted the dream of another prisoner. Joseph asked the man to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh. Unfortunately, the man forgot about Joseph (Genesis 40).

Another example of a TCK is Daniel’s service under four different leaders from three different cultures (Daniel 1-6). Carried off to another culture, Daniel’s ability to serve under difficult leaders began to emerge even as a youth during his three years of higher education. Here are some of the challenges Daniel faced.

- Religious issues. While Daniel was in training, the king declared that students had to eat specific foods. Daniel resolved not to eat foods that would defile him (Daniel 1).
- “Impossible” demands and threats if those were not met (Nebuchadnezzar). The king demanded that Daniel and others do something no one could do. Without telling them his dream, he demanded that they describe and interpret it—or they would all be killed (Daniel 2).
- Poor judgment and rash decisions (Darius). Darius the Mede took over the kingdom and retained Daniel, a man he intended to place over the whole kingdom. Lower administrators persuaded Darius to issue a decree that would result in

Daniel’s death if he continued to worship his God (Daniel 6).

What can missionaries do?

Niebuhr’s serenity prayer describes two options, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Joseph and Daniel used both of these options.

The first option is to accept things one cannot change. As a slave and prisoner, Joseph was not able to change anything. He just accepted his situation and served the best he could wherever he was and in whatever situation he found himself. Daniel sometimes chose to do this as well.

- Joseph, when sold into slavery. Potiphar noticed that Joseph, living in his house, was true to his own God and that God blessed him. Joseph evidently chose to serve his master well rather than to wallow in self-pity. He became Potiphar’s trusted attendant and was ultimately in charge of everything Potiphar had (Genesis 39: 1-6).
- Joseph, when accused. Joseph also evidently chose to serve the warden well in prison rather than to wallow in self-pity—he was put in charge of running everything in the prison (Genesis 39:20-23).
- Joseph, when forgotten. Joseph just continued serving in the prison. Finally, two full years later, when Pharaoh had a dream and asked for an interpreter, the man suddenly remembered Joseph. Pharaoh immediately sent for Joseph in the dungeon, asked him to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams, and ultimately put him in charge of the entire country of Egypt.

Again Joseph served his master well and coordinated preparations for disaster (Genesis 41).

- Daniel, under Darius. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den as Darius said, "May your God rescue you." It is interesting to note that Darius was so distraught he could not sleep while Daniel was with the lions. When God saved Daniel, Darius was so overjoyed that he issued a decree that everyone in his kingdom must reverence God. Daniel continued to prosper the rest of Darius' reign as well as the reign of Cyrus the Persian (Daniel 6).

Paul, an early missionary who also served in difficult situations, wrote about having the serenity to accept them: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances...the secret of being content in any and every situation" (Philippians 4:11-13). He described some of his difficult situations in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28.

The second option the serenity prayer suggests is to change the things one can. Daniel did this when he could.

- Daniel, facing religious issues. Determined not to violate his convictions, Daniel asked the chief official for a food exemption, but the official refused. Daniel then proposed an experiment to the guard who took direct care of him. When the experiment showed that vegetables and water were better than the rich diet, the guard changed their diet, without telling his superiors. Daniel and his three friends graduated at the top of their class and entered the king's service (Daniel 1). This approach may be risky because officials may see such actions as insubordination and become very angry.
- Daniel facing an "impossible" situation. Daniel again showed his ability to serve

under a difficult leader. Note the three steps he took in Daniel 2). First, he spoke to the commander of the guard "with wisdom and tact" (v. 14). Second, he asked the king, his difficult leader, for time (v. 16). Third, he asked his friends to pray (v. 18). Finally, God answered, and then Daniel praised and thanked him (v. 19-23). Daniel was made ruler over Babylon in charge of all the king's advisors (v. 48).

Daniel's procedure here is commendable. Using wisdom and tact, he asked everyone involved for permission, he asked people to pray, and then he thanked God.

One option not mentioned in the serenity prayer is for missionaries just to quit and return to their passport countries. Some do that. This may be necessary in some circumstances when false leaders thwart God's call to service. Jesus gave strong warnings about false prophets, false Christs, and false teachers. He noted that there will be many such people and that they will deceive many. Some of these people may be in leadership positions. Jim Jones (People's Temple) had a successful cross-cultural ministry in Indianapolis and was a charismatic leader taking his people to California and Guyana. Unfortunately, his followers all died of suicide/murder in Jonestown Guyana in 1978.

An excellent book about serving under leaders, good or difficult, is *Leading from the Second Chair: Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your Role, and Realizing Your Dreams* by Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson published by Jossey Bass, 2005.

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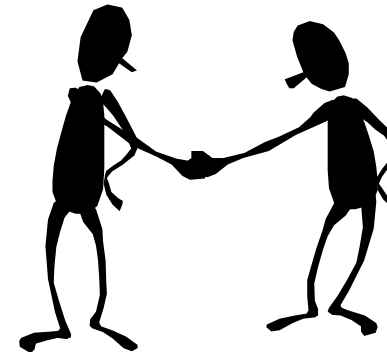
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