

Reflections on Leadership

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Ramez retired last year as IFES Regional Secretary for the Middle East and North Africa, but his experience of student ministry and Christian leadership spans several countries and embraces a number of parachurch organisations. He shared the following reflections on leadership at a gathering of IFES senior staff last June, having briefly introduced his subject with a reference to what Peter writes to fellow leaders in 1 Peter 5:1-4.



When people ask me how I was 'trained' as a Christian leader, I find it very hard to give them a simple answer. I cannot look back to a particular course or book through which I was trained in leadership. I am sure that my 'training' has been the accumulated reflection on many experiences, positive and negative, over the last 28 years since I first became a committed follower of Jesus Christ. Leadership styles vary, and each of us, depending on his own personality, upbringing, and leanings, tends to prefer one style over another. However, as I have seen Christian students and full-time Christian workers deeply hurt by my own or other people's attempts at Christian leadership, I have become more and more convinced that we cannot, as Christians, simply accept all models of leadership as equally valid in fulfilling the call of the gospel. The end does not justify the means, because, as someone once told me so wisely, the means are the end in the process of becoming: the very means you use to achieve an end determine the end you will achieve. If you manipulate or coerce people to achieve an end, however worthy that end may be, you will, by definition, not reach a worthy end.

Over the years, I have come to the strong conclusion that leadership is a quality much more than a task; a relationship more than a position. The character of the leader often counts more than his ability to perform a given task. We can never lead only on the basis of a position or an office, but we must lead also on the basis of trusting relationships with those whom we are called to lead.

Therefore, leadership is basically about shepherding the flock entrusted to the leader in a servant spirit. A true Christian leader must be a team builder; he cannot be a loner. He is not so much a 'scout' (pioneer) with others trailing behind, but a shepherd who is behind the flock moving them on. There is a place in the Christian community for the pioneer. But pioneers are not usually good team leaders. How many of us have seen gifted pioneers establishing creative new ministries, and then becoming dismal failures when they try to manage the very organisations they have instituted!

There are three major principles which are natural corollaries of the above convictions:

1. The leader must care more about people than about programmes

A comment by a staffworker in Canada whom I had supervised for many years still haunts me. It was several years after we had both left staff, and she was reflecting on her years with us. She was not bitter, or angry, but she looked me in the face and said, "I always felt pressured by you; I felt that you were more interested in using me to accomplish your goals and the goals of the ministry than in me as a person and my needs!" It was a devastating statement, because my avowed goals and purposes were completely contrary to what she said. I was a committed advocate of caring for and pastoring staff. But she made me realize again how easy it is for us to flaunt slogans, and yet manipulate and use people. I had wanted our student ministry to succeed, and in my zeal, I had forgotten the very people who were part of our team to accomplish that goal.

Now, of course, this does not mean that staff teams are simply set up to meet the needs of the staff members. Some staff will not be able to continue because their personal needs are so great that they cannot contribute to the general good. In such a case, it is much better for that person to leave, understanding the reasons why, than to stay on and feel used or manipulated. But our reason for their leaving should not be simply that they are not helping to accomplish our programmes. Rather, as much as possible, it should reflect a mutual understanding that they are not in the right job. This point takes us naturally into the second important principle.

2. If we really care about people more than programmes, we must help them to develop their visions

If I am helping a staff member and a staff team to develop their own vision rather than imposing my vision on them, then I can demand of them excellence, commitment and dedication to the accomplishment of that goal. We need joint ownership of goals so that we can have true partnership. The leader's task becomes, then, to help team members accomplish the task they are convinced they should be accomplishing. I remember my great consternation when the president of a student group with whom I had worked all year, and with whose group I had shared my ideas of student leadership and student initiative, said at the end-of-year banquet: "We want to thank Ramez because all the good plans and ideas we had this year came from him!" His colleagues gasped as he said this because they knew I would be discouraged rather than encouraged!

It is easy to manipulate people into implementing our visions. It is much harder, yet more biblical and long-lasting, if we are able to help them develop, expand and implement their own visions given to them by the Holy Spirit. When people have ownership of their visions, then the vision will continue even after the leader leaves. This leads us on to the next principle.

3. The leader should be thinking continually about how to work himself out of his tasks (though not necessarily out of his position)

When, as a young university student, I was appointed missionary secretary of our university group, I was given the mandate of doing my job well and finding someone else to take it on the following year. I was made to understand that an effective leader's task involves training his replacement. This concept of leadership has been deeply ingrained in me ever since my student days. I have not always been able to achieve it, but it has always been one of my most important goals. Yet it seems to be so rare in the Christian world, where in place of leaders we have 'stars'! We build people up so much that it is virtually impossible to find someone to replace them who will not be a disappointment. Being indispensable becomes a virtue rather than a sin.

Experience has shown me that if I really want to implement this principle, I must sometimes hold myself back and not try to be 'too good'! I need to do things that are transferable, which others can pick up and do well, and even better than me. Often when I am invited to speak to a group, I will ask them if I could train them to give the presentation or lead the group themselves. I would much rather work with a small group of leaders to equip them to do a task than do the task myself. It is so easy simply to be a popular speaker or 'star' and find oneself hopelessly over-committed, too busy and with no one to take over. The real Christian leader is someone who is putting others to the fore. His dream is that he would decrease and others would increase.

Why do we have so few people doing this? I firmly believe it is because we do not articulate this principle and expect it of our leaders. We force them to become supermen who will eventually let us down.

If I believe that the true test of my leadership is what happens after I leave my responsibility, then all I do will be coloured by this conviction. Nothing will thrill me more, and make me feel more successful, than when I hear that one of the younger leaders I have helped has performed a task better than I could have done! Rather than being jealous or feeling threatened I will feel relieved and satisfied knowing that I am not indispensable. How different our Christian churches, institutions, groups and organisations would be if all of us as leaders would think and act in this way!

Leadership ability comes from experience, and experience includes learning through mistakes. Most of the time I have learned from my own mistakes, and this is quite painful. Maybe you can learn from my mistakes and avoid making the same mistakes I have made!

After eight years in leadership in IVCFCanada, Ramez returned to Egypt with his family in 1980. He is now General Secretary of the Egyptian Bible Society.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. *Some leaders are more people-oriented; others are more programme-or goal-oriented. Ramez has mentioned some of the dangers he perceives in putting programmes before people and also hints at the dangers of being too people-centred.*

What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of both styles of leadership?

Can you think of situations where one or the other style might be more effective?

2. *Think back over your own experiences in leadership. Are you more oriented to people or to programmes? (Get a friend to give you an independent assessment.) What areas do you need to work on, with God's help, in order to become a better leader?*

3. *Nehemiah and Barnabas are often singled out as good examples of the kind of leadership staffworkers exercise, Nehemiah because he built people while building the walls of Jerusalem, and Barnabas because he spotted the potential in Saul of Tarsus and John Mark.*

What lessons can you learn from Nehemiah and Barnabas?