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An Analysis of the Leadership Style of Nehemiah

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Passion	3
Prayer.....	4
Process, Planning, and Politics.....	5
Provision	6
Performance	7
Perseverance.....	8
Conclusion	9
Bibliography.....	10

Introduction

One of the greatest leaders who ever lived was a servant; his name is Nehemiah, and he sets the precedent for effective leadership. Nehemiah was a servant, the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I¹, and while his position was one of great importance to the king, Nehemiah was not known as, or referred to as a leader. In his role as cupbearer to the King, Nehemiah was an officer of high rank in the royal court, and his primary responsibility was to first taste the wine the King would himself drink; this was to ensure that the wine was not poisoned in an assassination attempt. Consequently, Nehemiah's job was a deadly one which required a good amount of courage.

Today there are dozens of books and hundreds – perhaps thousands of articles, journals, and other literary pieces lauding the leadership prowess of Nehemiah. Additionally, the word *leader* is used only four times in the book of Nehemiah (9:17, 11:11, 11:17, and 12:42), and none of those scriptures refer to Nehemiah, nor do they allude to his leadership in any capacity. As a student of the Bible, I agree with Christian and secular writers that Nehemiah sets an impressively high standard for effective leadership, and the most amazing part is the fact that he does this from the position of a servant.

Nehemiah was a multi-gifted leader, and he wasn't even trying to be. My support for the forementioned thesis is based on the many leadership styles accounted for in our modern societies. According to the MindTools© Content Team in their article entitled, *Leadership Styles: Choosing the Right Approach for the Situation*², there are not only Leadership Style

¹ Halley, Henry H. *Halley's Bible Handbook*. Classic. Zondervan, 1984.

² Content Team, MindTools.com. *Leadership Styles: Choosing the Right Approach for the Situation*. 2021. https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_84.htm.

Frameworks such as Lewin's Leadership Styles, The Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid, and The Path-Goal Theory, but there are also various specific leadership styles, and they each have their own psychological interpretation of what a good leader is. For example, the article enumerates four primary leadership styles which are pervasive in our culture, they are, Bureaucratic Leadership, Charismatic Leadership, Servant Leadership, and Transactional Leadership. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comparison and contrast of these styles, but they each emphasize various emotional and psychological qualities to create their individual categories. What impressed me the most in reading the various leadership styles identified by some of the greatest minds of the modern era, is that all the way back in 444 BC, Nehemiah, a servant cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I demonstrate nearly all of them.

In this paper, I will present several aspects of Nehemiah's leadership which in my opinion, encapsulates most, if not all the qualities of a successful and effective leader by today's standards. I will primarily use scriptures from the book of Nehemiah to argue and support my positions; although, I will also provide additional external sources for reference. It is my intention to demonstrate the complex elements of effective leadership from the life and experiences of a man who was a servant - Nehemiah.

Passion

An effective leader is a person who is passionate about the purpose, the project, and the people they are responsible for. In the book of Nehemiah, Chapter 1, Nehemiah was presented with a problem that touched him personally, one that emotionally moved him to a place of empathetic response. His brothers and countrymen informed him that Jerusalem was in dire states as they told him, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned

with fire” (Nehemiah 1:3)³. This was a monumental situation the emotionally impacted Nehemiah, and, once again, *moved* him to action. I emphasize the word *moved* because I want to make a distinction between it and one who is mandated to action. Mandated action involves someone who has been specifically commissioned to accomplish a task whether they want to or not – an order is given, and they are forced to comply.

In contrast, when Nehemiah received the report of Jerusalem’s condition, the news pierced his heart like a dagger in the hands of a violent killer, and he was personally, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually moved. Nehemiah says, “When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:4). The passion he felt in the moment is made evident in his words and actions to follow. Matthew Henry writes, “He wept and mourned. It was not only just when he heard the news that he fell into a passion of weeping, but his sorrow continued certain days.”⁴ Even the great Bible scholar and commentator recognizes the passion that consumed Nehemiah, a passion that compelled him to a level of leadership he was not looking for.

Prayer

Effective Christian leadership begins with prayer. Prayer is how Christian leaders obtain divine authorization to undertake the mission he/she may be so moved to engage. Prayer is an act of humility and submission to the sovereignty of God, acknowledging Him before any steps are taken toward what we think is important. A good leader should, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And

³ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ the New American Standard Bible (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995)

⁴ Henry, Matthew. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*. 6 vols. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991.

He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6), and this is how Nehemiah began the great work set before him. Nehemiah prayed, and in so doing he first acknowledged the holiness and greatness of God in an opening statement of adoration (Nehemiah 1:5). He proceeded to plead his case and ultimately, he petitioned God for the authorization to go and address the problems facing Jerusalem.

In the brief, but impactful closing sentence of Chapter 1, Nehemiah makes a clear and obvious statement of his true devotion by emphasizing his earthly role, “Now I was the cupbearer to the king” (Nehemiah 1:11). Forgive me for the “preachy” nature of my coming remarks. Nehemiah worked in the court of Artaxerxes, but he lived in the presence of God. He drank wine from the cup of the king, but his cup ran over with the anointing of The Most High. Well, I feel like preaching so I must stop there. A Christian leader never ventures out of his/her own accord, instead, God is acknowledged and petitioned for permission, and this is how we can be sure that our steps are ordered in His Word and that our leadership will be effective.

Process, Planning, and Politics

Effective leadership is built upon a foundation of process and planning. My definition of *process* in terms of leadership is a systematic way of thinking, and an organized, conceptual approach to accomplishing a goal or task. Further, to implement a conceptual process, one must have a viable plan in place to ensure the process is followed. A leader who is not process oriented will likely see their projects and tasks devolve into chaos and confusion, because by extension, it means there was not a plan in place to keep the effort on track.

I doubt Nehemiah was thinking in such contemporary terms as he took on the responsibility of rebuilding the wall and reestablishing a degree of dignity to Israel, but his leadership style undoubtedly encapsulated these modern concepts. Take politics for example,

Nehemiah began his mission in Jerusalem with a bit of political manipulation. He needed an opportunity to broach the subject of his desire to go to his homeland and initiate the effort to fortify Jerusalem by rebuilding its protective wall. How do you tell your military captor that you want to take a time-out from being his servant, to go and improve your country's military position? Nehemiah had built up a good amount of personal and political capitol with the king, so when Artaxerxes noticed a change in Nehemiah's demeanor, he took an interest and asked a question which opened the door for Nehemiah to explain his concerns (Nehemiah 2:1-6). In his book, *The Old Testament Historical Books: An Introduction*, Dr. Israel P. Loken suggests that "Evidently the spiritual activities undertaken by Nehemiah over the past few months (mourning, fasting, and praying) had begun to take their toll on Nehemiah physically"⁵. I completely agree with Dr. Loken's assessment, and one thing is certain, Artaxerxes I was not a buffoon, if Nehemiah did not have a process and a plan to divulge to the king, his political influence would have gotten him nowhere, all three were demonstrated by Nehemiah with major success, and we would do well to learn these lessons for ourselves as we endeavor to become leaders in the Kingdom of God.

Provision

An effective leader must have adequate resources available to supply the needs of the processes and people required to complete a project. I am an Information Technology consultant of nearly 35 years, and I have managed projects with budgets into the millions of dollars. Without the necessary resources of people, appropriate access and authority, and the required tools, these projects would have been massive failures. Nehemiah was aware of this in 444 BC and was sure to elicit the necessary resources he needed from the king who sanctioned this noble

⁵ Loken, Israel P. *The Old Testament Historical Books: An Introduction*. Houston, TX: Xulon Press, 2008.

undertaking (Nehemiah 2:7-8). Once again, we see the favor of God working to support Nehemiah, because it was God who ultimately authorized the rebuilding project at Nehemiah's request, so God was obligated to perform the Word He had spoken – God was also vested in the success of the project.

As I close this section of the analysis, I want to accentuate Nehemiah's acknowledgment of God. Nehemiah never forgot who it was working to bring him into the success he was experiencing, so he specifically gives glory to God for the prosperity of this moment when he says, "And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me" (Nehemiah 2:8). As Christian leaders, we are compelled to remember that nothing is possible without the good hand of God working on our behalf, making the impossible possible, and opening doors that no man can shut.

Performance

An effective leader gets it done. God provided Nehemiah with everything he needed to be successful in rebuilding the wall – it was all in his possession. Now, it is time to do something with the provision that has been given and execute the details of the project – it's time to perform. As my beloved mother used to say, "Anthony, this is where the rubber meets the road". Essentially, this is where the Process and Planning mentioned above, snaps to life and makes their way to some level of results.

The first thing Nehemiah does is evaluate the situation regarding Jerusalem and the wall. He already knew that the condition was bad, and in general, he already knew it would take massive resources to approach the project. What he didn't know were the details that are revealed through personal inspection and evaluation. Therefore, Nehemiah took three days in Jerusalem, so that he could see for himself what the actual condition of the city was and use that

information to create a detailed procedural plan to approach the project with an expectation of success (Nehemiah 2:11-17). Nehemiah would not know how to proceed if he did not take the time to assess the situation and evaluate options for correcting the problems.

Perseverance

In the practice of leadership, obstacles and opposition are inevitable. Every leader will face difficult moments over the course of the work they do, and though he was authorized by God and sanctioned by Artaxerxes, Nehemiah was no exception. Like the Apostle Paul, Nehemiah had a thorn in his flesh, and that thorn went by the name of Sanballat. Sanballat was a detractor to of the divine purpose God had for Nehemiah to fulfill. When Nehemiah was given permission from the king to rebuild the defenses of Jerusalem, the Bible says Sanballat became furious at the news (Nehemiah 4:1). In fact, according to the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Sanballat became literally “hot” after hearing the news that an effort was already sanction and underway, and the very idea of Jerusalem being fortified something Sanballat, and his primary supporter Tobiah could not accept⁶.

Sanballat and Tobiah made repeated attempts with varying levels of progression, to try and derail Nehemiah's mission. Initially, Sanballat attacked Nehemiah with words ridicule (Nehemiah 4:1-3), but Nehemiah persisted and recorded, “So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work” (Nehemiah 4:6). Nehemiah's persistent leadership had inspired the people to become even more determined to build the wall despite Sanballat's opposition. When this effort to spoil the project failed, Sanballat increased the magnitude of his attacks by aligning himself with co-conspirators who all

⁶ Kohlenberger III, John R., and Kenneth Barker. *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Abridged. Zondervan, 1973.

agreed to make war against Nehemiah and his laborers in the work. But Nehemiah and the people prayed, and then prepared themselves for battle, but they continued to build the wall in the face of the threat from Sanballat and his supporters (Nehemiah 4:7-23). This teaches us a very important leadership principle, that obstacles and hindrances to the task you are working to accomplish may come under ridicule and attack, but that does not have to halt the effort at hand. You may need to adjust your resource to compensate for the imminent threat of danger, but you can do so without being completely averted from your plan.

Sanballat attempted several times to lure Nehemiah into a trap, so that he could capture and kill him. He invited Nehemiah to meet in various places to negotiate a settlement, but his real intention was to corner Nehemiah and do him harm. Fortunately, Nehemiah was a wise leader who was determined to finish his work, and each time Sanballat made the deceptive offer, Nehemiah responded by saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” (Nehemiah 6:3). Determination and focus are the two qualities on center stage here, and Nehemiah possessed both. As Christian leaders, the Kingdom work that God has for us to do is too great for us to stop just to satisfy someone else’s agenda, who ultimately seeks to derail what God is doing in our lives.

Conclusion

Nehemiah’s leadership qualities are many, and within the scope of this paper, I can only begin to highlight partial aspects of a few of them. Nehemiah was a great leader and an inspiration to leaders spanning generations of humanity. It is my prayer that the high-level concepts of leadership as portrayed in the life of Nehemiah I have attempted to convey, ignites an interest in the hearts and minds of my readers to research, review, and apply these qualities to their own leadership styles.

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