Nehemiah: Principles on Leadership

August 23, 2009

Every book of the Bible contributes some theme to the whole. Nehemiah is the book on *leadership*. The following information is taken from a course on Biblical Leadership (Lessons 5 and 7).

**The Example of Nehemiah in Planning**
Nehemiah, a governor of Judah under the Persian kings, exhibits all three elements of effective planning:

1. **Vision** - the restored walls of Jerusalem
   - In 586 B.C., the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, razing both the walls and the temple.
   - In 537 B.C., some Jews returned, and started the following year to rebuild the temple, which was completed in 516 B.C., according to the seventy years of exile prophesied by Jeremiah. *The walls, however, were never rebuilt!* A royal decree had been given to cease work (Ezra 4:7-23).
   - In 444 B.C., Nehemiah, cupbearer for King Artaxerxes of Persia, heard of the ruins and wept (Neh. 1:1-4).
   - It was in those tears that a vision was born—a vision to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

   **Note:**
   1. Nehemiah’s vision was provoked by hearing about a need.
   2. Nehemiah’s vision was informed by the word of God, as seen in his prayer (1:5-11).
      - the goal in mind was in keeping with God’s heart for His people (1:5)
      - the goal in mind did not make excuses for past sins (1:6-7)
      - the goal in mind believed God for great things (1:8-11)
   3. Therefore, Nehemiah possessed a vision through both faith and love.

   **Application:**
   (1) Beware of setting up an *independent* vision!
      Too many men simply ask, “Where do I see myself being five years from now?”
      - What about God? Where does *God* see yourself being five years from now?
      - Granted, for a vision to be *your* vision, it must be according to *your* ideas and *your* desires.
      - The question is: Have your ideas and desires been informed by God and His word?
      - In other words, is your vision based on faith (in its ideas) and on love (in its desires)?
   (2) Ask God to *provoke* you towards His vision for your life by exposing you to genuine needs.
      If you really want to have a heart-felt vision in life, God must give it. In a sense, it is a calling.
      Ask Him to stir you up, to give you earnestness for some aspect of His cause (e.g. 2 Cor. 8:16).
      Nehemiah described his vision as “what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem” (2:12).

2. **Assessment** - the actual physical and political state of things in Jerusalem
   - When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he first assessed the ruins for himself (2:11-16).
   - In fact, he did this secretly, at night, before telling any of the Jews there his vision (2:12, 16).
   - Prior to arrival, he had also considered the political state of things, as seen in his request to the king (2:7-8).
   - Nehemiah also made a shrewd assessment on who was friend and who was foe (see Neh. 2:19-20).

   **Note:**
   1. Biblical planning in faith takes into consideration all facts (cf. Pr. 19:2).
      These facts include past sin (1:6-7, no excuses!) and God Himself.
   2. It is wise for leaders to do their research *before* broaching the vision to followers.

   **Application:**
   (1) Beware of making faith an *excuse* for laziness: Do your homework! Put the pencil to your situation!
      Even though Jesus was going to feed the four thousand with a miracle, He still asked His men: “How many loaves do you have?” (Mt. 15:34).
   (2) Among the people resources, make sure to exclude those who are opposed in principle (cf. 2:19-20).
      Interestingly, as with the king of Persia, “he who is not against us is on our side” (Lk. 9:50).
   (3) In assessing the situation, do not forget that *God* is also a fact—*the* Fact—to consider in the equation.
      God is “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20).
      The only thing that limits God is God Himself, for “He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13);
      therefore, do not entertain any vision or any plan anything contrary to His word,
      but beyond these considerations, rule nothing else out (cf. Jer. 32:17, 27; Lk. 1:37).
      Remember, as Jonathan told his armor bearer before a Philistine rout:
      “Nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6).
3. **Strategy** - flexible in prayer, distributing the building duties among the people by families

   Three things stand out in Nehemiah’s strategy for rebuilding the walls:

   First, Nehemiah bathed everything in prayer.
   - One of his prayers was long, after fasting for days (1:5-11); another, spontaneous and short (2:4).
   - The thread of prayer goes throughout the book, even including prayers as Nehemiah writes (5:19).
   - **Note**: Nehemiah saw no contradiction between prayer and effort (e.g. 4:9).

   Second, Nehemiah remained *flexible*, handling situations as they arose.
   - Externally, when Tobiah and Sanballat conspired to attack, Nehemiah armed the workers (4:7-23).
   - Internally, Nehemiah corrected oppression due to usury, and set a frugal example (5:1-19).
   - The book is filled with wise moves Nehemiah made in handling the people and their enemies.
   - Third, Nehemiah did not unnecessarily disturb *personal interest*, but even used it in his favor.
   - It seems that some parts of the wall were repaired by families with an interest in that part (ch. 3).
   - Moreover, Nehemiah told the workers to fight for their families (4:13-14).

   With God’s blessing (2:18, the hand of God upon him), the wall went up in *fifty-two days* (6:15)!
   - Even the enemies “perceived that this work was done by our God” (6:16).

   **Application**:
   1. Do not assume that _planning_ in itself is unspiritual (cf. Eccl. 11:1-6).
      - Though the decision of the Lord ultimately stands, He still assumes that man will plan (Pr. 16:9).
   2. You must make _prayer_ a priority in all your planning, for no plan succeeds without God (Ps. 127:1).
      - In fact, once the initial vision is given, commit it to earnest, persistent prayer.
      - Then, once the strategy is in place, commit that also to earnest, but flexible prayer.
      - When it comes to prayer, there is a crucial difference between vision and strategy.
      - The main value of a vision is to know what to pray for.
         - If the vision is of the Lord, that prayer will never change.
      - Moreover, as you pray your vision, your strategy will often emerge in prayer!
      - However, as you pray the strategy, stay flexible, for as things arise, your strategy may change.
      - David “inquired of the LORD before separate battles (2 Sam. 5:19, 23; opp. Josh. 9:14).
      - Therefore, anything that comes up—the first step, again, is to your knees. Pray, pray, pray!
   3. Finally, make plans with consultation, especially with the Scriptures in hand.
      - Too many leaders assume that the Bible has little to say about many practical matters.
      - In actuality, the Bible is loaded with not only ends, but also means, telling us how to reach goals.
      - Illus. In recruiting, J. Hudson Taylor carefully followed Jesus’ instructions (Mt. 9:37-38).
      - We honor God by striving for His ends (vision) according to His means (strategy).

   **Summary**: Vision! Assessment! Strategy! Besides the wall project, Nehemiah also tackled another problem:

   - **Vision** - the spacious city of Jerusalem needed a larger population (7:4)
   - **Assessment** - Nehemiah researched genealogical records, apparently in light of the problem (7:5ff)
   - **Strategy** - ultimately, the people were tithed in a sense, with one-tenth moving into the city (11:1)

**The Example of Nehemiah for Motivation**

As stated in an earlier lesson, the book of Nehemiah is the Bible’s book on leadership.

*How did Governor Nehemiah motivate the people to follow his lead?*

1. **He presented the people with a God-endorsed vision.**

   When Nehemiah first came to Jerusalem, he told them of the problem, the goal, and the purpose:
   - “You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire.
      - Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach” (Neh. 2:17).
   - Then he added a word about the *hand of God* as evidenced (apparently) by the king’s favor (2:18).

   Based on Nehemiah’s brief “inauguration” speech, note the following components of a call-to-work:
   1. Pinpoint the need at hand (“waste, . . . burned”).
   2. Call men to the goal out front (“let us build the wall”).
   3. State the overall purpose above (“no longer . . . a reproach”).
   4. Give evidence of God’s hand beneath the whole endeavor (2:18).

   **Note**: The best energy comes from joy, and the best joy comes from the Lord.
   - Therefore, point them to God, for “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (8:10).
2. He met opposition with unashamed faith.
   Nehemiah was well aware that of the enemy’s tactic to use fear as a means of discouragement (6:9).
   In combating fear, Nehemiah publicly and repeatedly focused the people’s attention on God:
   “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome…” (4:14).
   Later, he added, “Our God will fight for us” (4:20). A leader must have confidence in God!
   Note: Again, this assumes a God-endorsed vision. For other plans, faith is in vain (Ps. 127:1).
   In order to be this kind of a leader in public, Nehemiah had to be this kind of a man in private.
   Thus we read over and over how often Nehemiah prayed in private (e.g. Neh. 6:9b).
   Without a habit of prayer in private, public words of faith sound hollow and unconvincing.

3. He handled problems with immediate attention.
   Little else kills motivation more than a leader’s procrastination in dealing with problems.
   We think to ourselves, “Why should I follow someone who cannot get anything done?”
   Nehemiah faced the two kinds of problems that all leaders face and must overcome:
   (1) Outer opposition - e.g. ridicule (4:1-5), hostility (4:7-23), conspiracy (6:1-9), and harmful alliance (6:17-19; 13:4-9)
   (2) Inner turmoil - e.g. complaints (4:10, 12), injustice (5:1-13), duplicity (6:10-14),
       and disobedience (13:1-31).
   In all cases, the book of Nehemiah records his swift attention and resolution at pursuing a solution.
   This includes disciplining the ranks, as seen in his strong opposition to intermarriage (13:25).

4. He reproved both the enemies and his own people with facts and logic.
   Nehemiah spoke plainly to his foes: “You have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem” (2:20).
   To his own people who were sinning, he was equally blunt: “What you are doing is not good” (5:9).
   To reinforce such reproofs, Nehemiah would often cite facts of history (e.g. 13:18; cf. 9:5-38).
   Note: One clear example goes a long way in making a point quick (e.g. 13:26, Solomon).
   In addition to facts, Nehemiah also used the logic of consistency. For example:
   “According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations.
   Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?” (5:8).
   Therefore, when confronting issues, a leader should avoid lengthy explanations and cut to the chase.

5. He himself set an example of humility and sacrifice.
   Nehemiah worked with the people, even sleeping with his clothes on for defense reasons (4:23).
   Moreover, Nehemiah also declined “the governor’s provisions” for twelve years (5:14-18).
   He did so due to his fear of God and the burden on the people (5:15, 18).
   By suffering with his people, Nehemiah “continued to work on this wall” (5:16).
   Note: There are two ways that a leader can give followers a sense that he is working with them,
   either by doing the job himself or by not making the job more burdensome on followers.
   It is this principle of leading by example that is stressed so often in the New Testament:
   (1) Jesus girded the towel and washed the disciples’ feet as an example (Jn. 13:15; cf. 1 Pt. 2:21).
   (2) Peter commanded elders to rule without lording it over the flock, but by example (1 Pt. 5:3).
   (3) Paul also urged Titus to show himself to be “a pattern of good works” (Titus 2:7).
       Paul even presented himself as an example to follow (1 Cor. 11:1; Ph. 3:17).
   Note: Nothing ruins a leader’s effectiveness more than reproach (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).
   Nehemiah’s enemies, for example, tried to trick him into reproach (6:13).
   Therefore, a leader should guard against reproach, even by refraining from lawful things.
   For example, Paul waived his right to pay in Corinth (2 Cor. 11:7-12; cf. 1 Cor 9:12).

6. He led the people to make a formal commitment.
   It is one thing to leave people with feelings from a message; it is another to elicit formal commitment.
   Even the Gospel recruits disciples and formalizes their conversion with a public baptism (Mt. 28:19).
   In the book of Nehemiah, we see two kinds of formal commitments:
   (1) Twice the people respond with the verbal commitment “Amen!” (5:13; 8:6).
   (2) Later, many of the people affix their seal to a written commitment (9:38-10:27).
   The benefits of a formal commitment are twofold:
   (1) By forcing a yes/no decision, followers generally take the call more seriously.
   (2) Subsequent accountability can be based on an indisputable, voluntary, objective standard.

7. After the mission was accomplished, Nehemiah arranged a dedication with celebration (12:27-43).
   Some leaders are all work and no pleasure. No! Dedicate the finished work to God and celebrate!
   Even God reviewed His handiwork with satisfaction at the end of each day (Gen. 1:4, etc.).