

Study Leave Report

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Leadership in Congregations

2012

Study Leave Report – Leadership in Congregations

When applying for study leave to complete the Leadership in Congregations paper through Otago University my stated goals were to:

1. Be able to describe my personal style of leadership and be more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of this style; and
2. Be able to understand more fully the tensions that exist within congregational life and the impact of these tensions upon congregational leaders; and
3. Explain and utilise effective approaches to managing change within a congregation.
4. Set in place leadership strategies within the congregation

The course wasn't one that specifically helped a person to define their leadership style although within the various readings and discussions I was able to define further my strengths thereby helping me form an overall picture of my more natural leadership style.

The course did deal with the subjects of leading change, teams, conflict, systems theory, and the nature of the leader.

One assignment in particular brought some of these issues together and it is this assignment that I submit as my Study Leave Report. The study and writing of this assignment enabled me to reflect deeply on who 'Gene' is and caused me to carefully evaluate what 'shape' of ministry God has called me to. It is no surprise that, for me, my personality does have an effect on my style of leadership, and my style of leadership is perhaps suited to more specific situations not usually encountered in the current 'shape' of parish ministry.

Essay Topic

What are the factors that make for successful leadership? How much is the style of leadership a congregational leader exercises a result of his/her personality and to what extent should it be determined by the characteristics of the local church?

Introduction

What are the factors that determine successful leadership? What is personality? What does it mean for a local church to have characteristics? To answer the essay topic the terms 'leadership', 'personality' and 'characteristics' need some kind of definition. Only then can we discuss the effects of personality and congregational characteristics on leadership style. Only after the discussions on leadership style can the initial question, "What are the factors of successful leadership?" For the purposes of this essay the congregational leader in mind is the Pastor, Priest, or Minister in a congregation. The congregation is that group of people amongst whom the leader exercises his/her responsibilities.

Leadership

It is no easy task to define leadership. Most definitions describe leadership using verbs promoting the idea of leadership as an action - it is something that 'happens'. The verbs include inspiring, directing, moving, helping, and relating. John Maxwell has managed to reduce the definition of leadership to one word - influence.¹ That influence is an important ingredient of leadership is not to be denied. It is not however the only ingredient. We have the person exercising leadership and those experiencing leadership being exercised. Leadership therefore includes 'relationship'.² So far we have 'influence' and 'relationship' but these alone do not equate to the requirement of leadership.

¹ John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1993), 1.

² See, Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* (Leister, England: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 22; James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* 3rd Edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 20.

The third ingredient is purpose. Different definitions describe 'purpose' using terms such as vision³, a dream⁴, what needs to be done⁵, the mission⁶ and so on. The most appropriate definition I read is from Joseph C. Rost:

"Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and their collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes."⁷

I agree with this definition. Not only does it include the three important ingredients of leadership but it also understands that leadership is two-way. Not only does a leader influence their collaborators but the collaborators also influence the leader. Also, the use of 'collaborators' rather than 'followers' understands that leadership is an 'amongst' role rather than an 'above' role. Agreeing with this principle Galindo writes, "In the congregational context, leadership is a shared enterprise between clergy and the laity who are all called to be ministers."⁸ For the purposes of this essay Rost's definition of leadership is adopted.

If any of the three ingredients were to be highlighted as more important it would be 'relationship'. Leadership can't happen without influence and influence cannot happen without relationship. Because leadership happens in the context of two or more person's hope to fulfil a purpose, relationship again is central. In this relationship of people influencing one another to achieve a common purpose we have a 'system'.

³ Harry Tan, *Responsible Leadership* (Palmerston North, NZ: Harry C. S. Tan, 2009), 38.

⁴ Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *The Promise of Partnership* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com, Inc., 2000), 105.

⁵ Leith Anderson, *Leadership that Works* (Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 51.

⁶ John Edmund Kaiser, *Winning on Purpose* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 102.

⁷ Joseph C. Rost, "Leadership Development in the New Millennium," *Journal of Leadership Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1993), 99.

⁸ Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004), 135.

Systems Theory

“Systems thinking is... a way of thinking about life as all of a piece... about how the whole is arranged, how its parts interact, and how relationships between the parts produce something new.”⁹

Steinke writes that people in systems affect each other; emotional responses are “always expressed in relation to someone or something” and that while people act according personality types if you change the environment people will begin to function differently.¹⁰ Understanding systems to be emotional environments we can look out for ways in which emotional interactions promote health or disease within the system.¹¹ A local congregation is therefore a system and the leader one of the parts of the system. So it is here, in the bounds of Systems Theory, where we begin to find an answer as to whether the style of a leader is personality driven or shaped by the characteristics of the local church.

Personality

The term ‘personality’ is best defined as the “consistency in people’s behavior [sic] over time and situations while also explaining their distinctiveness.”¹² A person’s style of leadership is impacted by their personality. Whilst the nurture/nature debate still exists regarding personality there is no question that external forces on a person’s life helps to mould and shape personality from a young age. What this means is that when a leader steps into the life of a congregation they bring with them all of their experiences both positive and negative and the learned behaviours stemming from those experiences.

⁹ Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 1996), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² Wayne Weiten, *Psychology: themes and Variations*, Exec. Ed. Michele Sordi (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 508. (Sinclair 2007)

Congregational Characteristics

In discussing congregational typology Hadaway writes, “Types are concepts that reduce the incarnational complexity of real churches to a set of key characteristics.”¹³ These characteristics are often gathered around congregational size and/or congregational identity.¹⁴ For instance, the smaller church (congregation <70 people) can be characterised as a club, clan, or family church.¹⁵ Churches with numbers above this have been characterised as the Pastoral Church, Program Church, and Corporation Church.¹⁶ Churches might be characterised by their theological stance i.e. Pentecostal, Charismatic, Conservative and so on.

As with the personality of the leader the characteristics of a given congregation have been built up over time. The way a congregation ‘behaves’ has been informed by their tradition, denomination, past leaders, number of members, age of membership and so on.

Style of Leadership: Personality Driven or Congregationally Driven?

Style of leadership might best be described as the leaders preferred approach to leading.¹⁷ That this preferred style of leading is shaped by the leader’s personality goes without saying; but should personality be the only criteria in leadership style or should the character of the local congregation also shape style? According to our definition of “Leadership” and understanding of “Systems Theory” the answer isn’t either/or but rather both/and.

When leadership is being exercised it necessarily involves change, something systems don’t like. Systems enjoy homeostasis. ‘Homeostasis is the tendency for a system, relationship, or organization to mold the behavior of others into

¹³ Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 35.

¹⁴ Galindo, *Hidden Lives*, 115-131.

¹⁵ See Hadaway, *Behold*, 35-40; Arlin J. Routhage, “Sizing up a Congregation for New Member Ministry,” *Congregational Vitality Series* No.1 (New York: Congregational Development Services, Episcopal Church Center, Published date unknown), 1-34.

¹⁶ Routhage, *Sizing Up Congregations*, 1-34.

¹⁷ Richard L. Daft, *The Leadership Experience* 5th Edition (Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning, 2008), 65.

predictable patterns, making it possible for us to “get along.”¹⁸ Change within a system is a cause for anxiety. The response of those within the system to this anxiety is a barometer of emotional maturity.¹⁹

Because (visible) leadership takes place in the moments of encounter with congregation members, in different settings, the emotional maturity of the leader is often in the spotlight. As previously mentioned when a leader steps into the life of a congregation they bring with them all of their experiences of life, both positive and negative, and the learned behaviours stemming from those experiences. As change occurs within the life of a congregation, and anxiety levels rise, the emotional maturity of the leader is tested and revealed in his/her personality and can either aid or hinder the congregations purposes. This is where ‘differentiation’ is an essential skill for a leader. Equating differentiation with Old Testament wisdom Ronald Richardson defines differentiation²⁰ as the ability to:

1. Perceive more accurately the reality of situations;
2. Identify his or her own opinions, beliefs, values, and commitments, and the principles of behavior that derive from these;
3. Think clearly and wisely about possible options for action and the likely consequences for each of these options;
4. Act flexibly within the situation on the basis of these perceptions, thoughts, and principles.

Understanding that leaders aren’t always fully able to differentiate might be behind Warren Bennis’ words, “The process of becoming a leader is very much the same as becoming an integrated human being.”²¹ This quote alludes

¹⁸ George Parsons and Speed Leas, *Understanding your Church as a System* (New York: Alban Institute, 1993), 7.

¹⁹ Jim Herrington, *The Leaders Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003), 33.

²⁰ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 86.

²¹ Amanda Sinclair, *Leadership for the Disillusioned* (Corws Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007), xiii, citing Warren Bennis, *Why Can’t Leaders Lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989)

to the point that people in leadership suffer from dis-integration as human beings. Emotionally immature leaders allow their emotions to guide their leadership style, which can cause damage within the life of a congregation.

Fortunately, “Emotional competence can be taught and coached, even if not all emotional disorders can be overcome.”²² Often the one place that can provide an environment for such growth to take place is the local congregation. “In a systems approach, the growth process that receives major attention is the person's capacity to be a self in a relationship system-to grow as a mature person... If invested in growth, healthy congregations will have leaders devoted to learning.”²³

For a leader to be able to take this journey requires an attitude of servant-leadership to the congregation. This means that the leader is not there to serve their own purposes - push their own barrows if you will - but rather serve in the best interests of God within God’s people. This means working within the characteristics of the local congregation understanding that as both leaders and congregation provide a healthy environment for growth the personality/character of both will most like change as part of the journey together.

Successful Leadership

Rost correctly identifies that when it comes to evaluating whether leadership has been successful²⁴ or not can only be decided in hindsight. Evaluation of leadership being successful requires ascertaining whether the:²⁵

1. Changes actually happened; and
2. Leaders and collaborators were responsible for the changes; and
3. Changes were beneficial or not.

²² Arthur Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behaviour* (New York: Alban Institute, 1999), 56.

²³ Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*, 31.

²⁴ Rost uses the terms “Good” and “Effective”. Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

In evaluating whether or not leadership has been successful it doesn't matter if the attempted change failed - leadership can still have taken place.²⁶

Within the context of a congregation perhaps one of the factors of successful leadership is the growth in the health of both the congregation and their leaders from the time the leadership began to the time it finishes. This health could be measured in different ways. Natural Church Development highlights eight areas typical of healthy congregations. They are:²⁷

1. Empowering Leadership
2. Gift-oriented Lay Ministry
3. Passionate Spirituality
4. Functional Structures
5. Inspiring Worship Services
6. Holistic Small Groups
7. Need-orientated Evangelism
8. Loving Relationships

And specifically for the leader, a growth in emotional maturity as evidenced by the practice of greater differentiated leadership style.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁷ Kevin Ward, "Leadership in Congregations: Module 3a, Healthy Congregations," in *MINX406: Handout* (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), 2.

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