

Personal Leadership Poverty: A Biblical Concept for Developing Transformative Leaders

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by Mason J. O. Oghenejobo

The collapse of companies like Enron and WorldCom has highlighted the need for ethical leadership and followership in contemporary organizations. The recent removal of Lord Brown as the CEO of British Petroleum, owing to his inappropriate behavior, further buttresses this need. Nations, businesses and churches are experiencing a dearth of authentic leadership.

This need has become apparent even when hiring people. In a study of about 300 companies that hired over 20,000 people, Leadership IQ (Anonymous, 2005) found that about 50% failed within the first 18 months because of poor emotional intelligence. Only about 18% were unequivocally successful. Most of these failed neophyte leaders were recruited using traditional interviews that tend to test mainly for technical competence. However, according to Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ, hiring mistakes can be avoided “if managers focus more of their interviewing energy on candidates coachability, emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament.” (cited in Anonymous, 2005, p. 15)

Based on a biblical review of leaders and followers who succeeded or failed in their personal and organizational responsibilities, the concept of personal leadership poverty has been developed to provide a basis for leadership assessment and development. It is argued that leaders/followers who fail are poor or deficient in some key characteristics that successful biblical leaders/followers exhibited. Developing leaders to overcome these poverty states will enable them to build trust and good relationships, essential elements in building transformative organizations. This article elucidates the concept of personal leadership poverty and the centrality of righteous love, trust and good relations in personal leadership development.

Personal Leadership Poverty

The Chambers Dictionary defines poverty as a state of lack, deficiency, need or meagerness. Kouzes and Posner (2004) described leadership as a one-to-one or one-to-many relationship that enables the pursuit and achievement of set purpose, vision and goals. According to Blanchard and Hodges (2005) leaders bring their hearts (motive and love of others), heads (beliefs and theories in use), hands (actions) and habits (daily display of commitment and interests) to all leadership settings.

In fact, it is the quality of the “self” that the leader brings to a leadership relationship that determines if he will succeed or not. If the self qualities are deficient, then the leader suffers from personal leadership poverty and he will be unsuccessful. He therefore needs mentoring, coaching, discipling or other interventions to overcome his personal leadership poverty.

A review of biblical leaders and followers who have succeeded or failed in their personal and organizational responsibilities, has revealed seven key characteristics that leaders who suffer from personal leadership poverty need to address to become successful. These are:

- Lack knowledge of and relationship with the true God
- Physical and emotional health
- Good character and integrity
- Required competence
- Good human relationships
- Physical and spiritual security
- Financial stewardship

Assessing and subsequently developing leaders to overcome these potential deficiencies will enable them to exhibit righteous love and build trust and good relationships that are essential in building transformative organizations. The key components of the personal leadership poverty framework are illustrated with biblical examples. The centrality of righteous love and trust building in these components and in the development of transformative organizations is elaborated. We start by looking at leadership and the true God.

Leadership and the True God

When I speak about the true God, I am referring to the God of the Bible who created the universe and humankind. He is the Head of the Holy Trinity (God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit), who collectively agreed to, “let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1: 26). Rardin (2001) described the Holy Trinity as a model of, “shared authority” or partnership. He asserts that leadership as a partnership of humans, to collectively serve themselves and a common purpose, emanates from this model. He opines that all authority comes from God because the, “earth is the Lord’s and all its fullness” (Psalm 24:1) and God gave man the responsibility and authority, “to tend and to keep” the earth (Gen. 2:15).

Thus, we see that the authority to rightly manage earthly resources and lead humans well in the management and distribution of these earthly resources comes from God. Through the Ten Commandments and expressions of His likes and dislikes as recorded in the Bible, God gave man a moral code that should guide our relationships with Him and our fellow humans, as we exercise our authority on earth. Love for God and man summarizes the moral code that God gave man to guide his conduct in all relationships. Jesus explained this when He said in Matthew 22:37-40:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.

God asked us to have dominion over physical things, not our fellow humans. We are to love and serve fellow humans. Given that love is an issue of the heart, we find that leadership starts from the heart. A leader who does not know or relate with the true God, or whose heart is not aligned with His will and moral code, will eventually fail. According to Blanchard and Hodges (2005), transforming a leader to become successful is a four-stage journey that starts with the leader. It progresses from personal leadership (stage 1) to one-to-one leadership (stage 2) to team and/or family leadership (stage 3) and subsequently to organizational and/or community leadership (stage 4). Successful personal leadership development starts and ends with knowing, obeying and following the true God. Successful biblical leaders like Joseph, David, Nehemiah, Mordecai, Daniel and Paul did so. Unsuccessful ones like Ahab, Jezebel and Nebuchadnezzar did otherwise. In fact, the Bible records several nations and groups (e.g., Sodom, Gomorrah and Babylon) that were

destroyed because their leaders and inhabitants did evil in the sight of the true God. Contemporary leaders who want to build enduring transformative organizations should develop themselves and followers to know, obey and follow the true God and avoid His wrath. We will now look at the emotional and physical health component of the personal leadership framework.

A Leader's Emotional and Physical Health

Good physical health is of great importance to leaders, as they require physical strength and stamina to carry out the tasks of leadership. Owing to poor or uncontrolled emotions (emotional poverty), Saul tried to pin David to the wall while he was serving in his house (1 Sam. 18:11). He even attempted to kill his son, Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:33). Rehoboam, Solomon's son lost his reign over Israel because of poor emotional intelligence (2 Kings 12). He was unable to correctly sense the changes in his environment and adapt accordingly. We currently live in a globalized world where change is rapid and unpredictable. Adaptation, innovation and good human relations have become increasingly critical to personal and organizational survival and successful leadership.

According to Goleman (1999), emotional intelligence refers to, "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (p. 317). From a systems view-point, it involves knowing and managing self and the environment (beliefs, values, intrigues, intents, actions of persons and groups) around us. According to Goleman's taxonomy, it entails:

- Self-awareness (know your strengths and weaknesses)
- Self management (e.g., self-control and adaptability)
- Social awareness (understanding society's good and evil socio-political constituents)
- Social skills (e.g., initiative, empathy, communication and relationship management)

David exhibited extreme emotional intelligence when he feigned madness in the presence of the king of Gath so that he could escape from him (1 Sam. 21: 10–15). Paul also exhibited rich emotional intelligence when he tried to preach to the Athenians about Christ from their inscription of the "unknown God" (Acts 17:23). Overall, leaders who want to succeed in our complex and ever-changing global environment, have to develop themselves and followers to be rich in emotional intelligence. We will now look at the good character and requisite competence components of the personal leadership poverty framework.

A Leader's Character and Competence

According to Rardin (2001), leadership is an inside-out phenomenon. It flows from character to conduct. The Bible teaches us that as a man, “thinks in his heart so he is” (Prov. 23:7) and, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). In fact, God looks mainly at the state of the heart in choosing leaders. He chose David in preference to his senior brothers because of the state of his heart (1 Sam. 16:7). He also rejected Solomon as a leader when his heart was turned away from Him by pagan women (1 Kings 11:9). Two key attributes that the Lord looks for in the hearts of leaders, are humility and the fear of God. Humility (power under control) enables the leader to serve and be teachable in varying circumstances, while the fear of God makes him to obey God’s commandments and exhibit integrity that enables building of trust in relationships. According to Winston (2002), leadership is relationship, and trust is the basis of all good and lasting relationships. Covey (1992) stated that trust (or lack of it) is at the root of leadership and organizational success or failures. Trust engenders confidence and commitment, while distrust creates fear, suspicion and apathy that de-motivate and destroy organizations. Covey (1992) opined that trustworthiness is based on leader character and competence. Kellerman (2004) attributed bad leadership to unethical practices (bad character) and ineffectiveness (incompetence). Covey and Merrill (2006) asserted that character includes integrity, motive and intent, while competency includes capability, skills, results and track record.

Benevolence, or the state of the heart of leaders towards followers, is a major contributor to trustworthiness and trust building (Winston, 2002). Followers want to trust their leaders. Without trust, it is difficult to get followership commitment, which is essential in building transformative organizations that can adequately respond to changes in our dynamic world. Leaders who want to succeed in our complex and ever-changing world, have to develop themselves and followers to be rich in good character, integrity and competence. If not, their organizations will suffer as a result of their personal leadership poverty. We will next look at the human relationship component of the personal leadership framework.

Leadership and Human Relationships

According to Winston and Patterson (2006), leadership is relationship. It essentially entails human interactions that are directed towards achieving a collective purpose and getting results. Blanchard (2007) said that good relationships and good results reflect good leadership. As discussed above,

trustworthiness is central to building lasting relationships (and subsequently getting results), and it is the self (character and competence) that the leader brings to the leadership relationship that determines his success. Leadership relationships progress from one-on-one to team and family and subsequently to organization and community. To be effective, leaders must develop themselves to be successful at all these different levels of human interactions.

According to Blanchard (2007), leaders have to match their leadership or relationship style to the development levels of their constituents. In essence, different styles suits different people. They categorized the maturity of followers into four states:

- D1: Low competence/high motivation (new joiners who are eager to learn but have limited skills)
- D2: Some competence/low motivation (persons with experience whose motivation have waned over time)
- D3: High competence/variable motivation (persons with sound knowledge/experience but have motivational challenges)
- D4: High competence/high motivation (those who are firing on four cylinders)

They opined that leaders have to employ different leadership styles: telling/directing, coaching, participating and delegating to match the different leadership situations. Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee (2002) also provided six different leadership styles, namely: visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting and commanding that leaders can utilize (or occasionally switch to) depending on the emotional situation they face and climate they wish to create. Irrespective of the situation and leadership styles, Winston (2002) asserts that leaders must display, “agapao love” or righteous love, which is rooted in high moral standards and entails doing the right things in the right manner and with the right method for the good of all. Overall, leaders who want to build transformative organizations have to develop themselves and followers to be rich in good human relations. We will now look at the physical and spiritual security component of the personal leadership poverty framework.

The Leader’s Physical and Spiritual Security

Jesus Christ taught that there are two forces at play in the world (John 10:10). There is an evil force or power which He described as the “thief” that comes to steal, kill and destroy, while there is a

positive force, which He represents, that gives life and life more abundantly. The Bible says in 2 Timothy 3:1-4:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come. Men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient, to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

In a nutshell, evil, unwholesome behavior and lawlessness will abound (and grow) while the love of many will grow cold (Matt. 24:12). There is strong competition and conflict between good and evil and much insecurity in our world today. Interestingly, the issue of insecurity has physical and spiritual dimensions. A review of the Bible shows that successful leaders were able to fight and win physical and spiritual battles. The key to their success was righteous alignment with the true God to whom belongs power, might, strength, riches and honor (1 Chron. 29:11–12). For example, David defeated Goliath with spiritual help from God. Also, through personal and collective fasting, praying, praising and worshipping the true God (2 Chron. 20), Jehoshaphat successfully overcame the Moabites, Ammonites and others that rose up against him. Moreover, Nehemiah, Mordecai and Esther successfully defeated their enemies through the help of God.

To be able to contain the negative impact of the spread of evil and unrighteousness around the world, contemporary leaders must develop themselves and their followers to be able to fight and win physical and spiritual battles. This requires alignment with the true God, as well as the development of the necessary knowledge and competencies. Complacency exposes leaders, their families and constituents to the vagaries of evil and this is poor leadership security. We will now look at the financial stewardship component of the personal leadership poverty framework.

Leadership and Financial Stewardship

Enron and WorldCom collapsed because of the poor financial stewardship of their leaders. According to Jensen and Meckling (1976), the agency theory of the firm can be used to explain the unethical actions of managers such as those of Enron and WorldCom, who as agents exhibited interests that are divergent from those of their principals (shareholders). According to agency theory, both parties (agents and principals) act to maximize their respective utilities. Consequently, they can develop divergent interests that are detrimental to the firm. In order to exercise control on

their agents, principals usually employ audits and other corporate control and governance mechanisms. However, the Enron case demonstrated that audit firms can be duplicitous and records provided by management and audit firms may not reflect a true account of the state of a firm. This indicates that regulations and external controls may not solve the unethical practices that are plaguing many organizations.

An alternative solution is to select and develop trustworthy leaders and workers who act as good stewards, placing the interests of their organizations above self-interests. According to Davis, Schooman and Donaldson (1997), stewardship theory defines situations in which managers are stewards whose motives are aligned with the objectives of their principals. They are not motivated by their individual goals. Leaders who want to build enduring organizations must overcome poor financial stewardship and develop their followers to be likewise. They must be good financial stewards with little, as well as with much, as their organizations grow. Our Lord Jesus taught us that, “he who is unjust in least is also unjust in much” (Luke 16: 10b) and, “if you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you your own?” (Luke 16: 12).

Conclusion

A review of leaders in the Bible has revealed that the successful ones were those who overcame personal leadership poverty. They were rich in knowledge of the true God and in obeying and following Him; physical and emotional health; good character and integrity; required competence; human relations; physical and spiritual security; and sound financial stewardship. Assessing and developing leaders with this frame will enable organizations to be transformative and able to meet the unpredictable changes in our current world.

About the Author

Mason Oghenejobo currently serves as director of Shell Nigeria Gas and is a doctoral student in strategic leadership at Regent University. He has a B.Sc. in Petroleum Engineering from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria; Master’s of Business Administration from Webster University, Leiden Netherlands; Certificate of Professional Development with emphasis in business strategy from the Wharton Business School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa. and Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies (CAGS) in Organizational Leadership from Regent University, Virginia Beach, Va.

Email: masogh@yahoo.com

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