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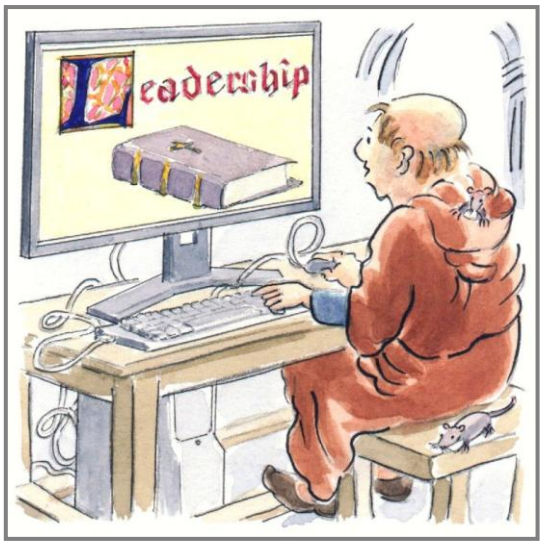

Lessons for leaders

TN120 Training Notes series: Leadership

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The gospels provide us with a master-class from Jesus on how to lead a motley group of people (his apostles) starting from a low base. These notes pick out some of the lessons we might learn today after a careful read of just one of the accounts, St Mark's Gospel.

The application could be for any set of church leaders and these notes might then form the basis for a training session. So it might be your home group leaders, those in charge of your young people's groups, project managers who lead a team to deliver a major church event, or any church members with a responsibility to teach and lead.

You might work through the whole list in one sitting, or it may be better to pick out the headings you feel to be particularly relevant.

1: Defining the group

Each person matters

Jesus gave his key team of twelve an identity. Mark takes the trouble to record each of their names, indicating the value Jesus placed on them (see 3:16-19*). We hear much more about Peter and some of the other members of the team but here they are all on the level. I wonder what became of Thaddaeus. Of course Jesus placed great value on individuals in all his ministry (such as the woman subject to bleeding in 5:25-34). And in all this the value he gave them was not as the world would see it. He served the ordinary, the insignificant, those with leprosy. Each one mattered.

If we lead a group or team of people, do we give each one personal recognition? Is there any danger of giving some more value than others, and for the wrong reasons? Or are we so focused on the task that we sideline the people?

* All references are to St Mark's Gospel

A clear task

But task is not unimportant! Not only does Mark record their names, he provides a clear summary of their role: first, to be with Jesus, secondly to be sent out (3:14,15). What a great balance! This is then worked out throughout the Gospel. He took them away from the crowds, he invested priority time with them, and he then sent them out (note that the example in 6:7 is only when he 'began' to send them).

Do those we lead know and understand what they are to do? Are we working to one overall aim for everyone, with each person given a clear role to play that contributes to the whole? Clarity of task is crucial for leaders and those led.

Strength in diversity

Back to the names for the Twelve. What an unpromising lot! First, their CVs would not have impressed Sir Alan Sugar. Secondly, they were not exactly chosen for the right chemistry to work together. Some rough fishermen, a political zealot and a hated tax collector (3:16-19) for starters.

Are we prepared to lead and work with anyone, however unpromising they may at first sight seem? Is our desire to take a diverse team which will challenge us, or to find a compliant team of people we can get on with? Do we believe everyone has potential?

2: Clarifying the plan

Stage 1: to show them who he is

The first half of Mark's Gospel shows Jesus gradually demonstrated who he was to the Twelve. He calmed the storm (4:35-41) and they asked the question he wanted them to ask, "Who is this?" (v41). He fed 5,000 men (6:39-44), he walked on water (6:47-52) when they were amazed because they had not yet understood (v52), he healed a blind man (8:22-26).

So what is the key lesson we want our followers to learn now? Do we have a clear plan we are working to so we can lead people in a direction that achieves our purpose and moves us towards our vision?

The key moment

Can you hear the emotion in the question Jesus asked them: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (8:29)? I wonder what his anticipation for their answer was like. Had they learnt lesson 1 yet or not? Peter had. "You are the Messiah…" What a moment! How Jesus must have rejoiced!

Do we deliberately challenge our followers at special moments to check on whether they have got the lesson we have been trying to put across? Are we prepared to wait to move on to a stage 2 to ensure that lesson 1 has been picked up correctly?

Stage 2: to lead them to Jerusalem

From then the whole emphasis switches to the route to the cross. 'He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer' (8:31). A tough lesson for those who had just got it into their heads that he was the Messiah. Peter was appalled. And then there was even more from Jesus, making discipleship as tough as he could (8:34-38). So is our planning in stages and are we prepared to push our followers on to a new, even unpopular, aim once we have achieved a first one?

3: Being tough as a leader

Challenging your followers

Jesus did not shy away from testing the Twelve. He sent them out when they might clearly mess it all up and he could have done a much better job himself (6:7-13). He put them on the spot (6:37). He never made discipleship easy as we have just noticed (eg. 8:34, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.") While fulfilling his mission he was so clearly developing the Twelve at the same time.

Do we challenge those we lead to enable them to grow and develop, without overstretching them when they are not ready? It may be more comfortable to just keep running as we are, but leaders develop followers, and you cannot do that without challenge.

Rebuking your followers

But there was more. When they got things wrong, he hardly side-stepped the issue. I guess they never forgot his "Get behind me, Satan!" to Peter (8:33). He was less abrupt about their desire for status in 9:33-37 and their view of children in 10:13-16 but those were still rebukes. In 7:18 he asked the Twelve, "Are you so dull?". He was clearly exasperated when they could not heal the possessed boy (9:19). He was 'indignant' with them in 10:14.

If we lead others are we prepared not just to challenge but to rebuke them when necessary? And do we allow them to rebuke us? If we line manage a worker, do we give praise and criticism or just one of these?

Prioritising your aims

Throughout the whole of his ministry Jesus had a priority of proclamation and teaching. He started his ministry 'proclaiming the good news of God… "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"' (1:14,15). When a healing campaign was at its height, he left it because he saw it as a diversion from his priority calling (1:38). His teaching had authority (1:22,27, etc.). He was always teaching with wisdom (eg 6:2) even right up to the end (12:35).

As leaders, do we have a clear priority in sight at all times? If things are going well in aspects of our work which are not our primary aim, are we prepared to walk away if we feel this is becoming a diversion? It may be a tough call but it marks out a good leader from a weak one.

Sharing your vulnerability

At the Last Supper in 14:12-31 Jesus opened his heart to his Twelve. In his acceptance of his anointing at Bethany just before that (14:3-9) he was not afraid to be emotionally open before his Twelve and others. Although this is not being tough on the Twelve, it is about being tough on himself. He was a great role model for his followers.

Are we hiding behind masks so that our people cannot see the real us? Or are we prepared to be open and honest about our feelings and our failings? What are we role modelling to our followers? Perhaps we need to ask them.

4: Being gentle as a leader

Patience with slow learners

Leadership can be intensely frustrating at times as Jesus knew. In the second feeding miracle he asked, "Do you still not understand?" (8:21), then Peter got it spectacularly wrong in 8:33, James and John should have known much better in 10:35-45, and in the Garden of Gethsemane his disciples were hardly running on adrenalin (14:37-42).

So do we allow for others who cannot keep up with us, or do we find ourselves frustrated and then angry? Are we patient with those who are different from us, or who cannot work at our pace?

Rest and real care

When the Twelve needed rest, Jesus sought to provide it ("Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" in 6:31). Note the 'by yourselves'. It would seem that he often aimed to escape the crowds to have time alone with the Twelve (eg. 3:7; 4:35,36; 10:32-34).

Do we give our followers our undivided attention when required? Do we work with them one-to-one or are we too busy to pay attention to everyone's needs and expect all our group to be self-starters? Do we ensure none of them is over-working and do we check they get time off?

Acceptance of others' failure

If anyone was ever let down it was our Master. It happened frequently but no more poignantly than in Judas' betrayal (14:18-21), in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:37-40) and in Peter's denial (14:66-72). It must have made him very sad, but he took no revenge – and we know from St John's Gospel that Peter was forgiven and restored.

So how do we react when we are let down? Are we angry? Does it break relationships? Or can we forgive? Can we cope with the loneliness of leadership and the pain leaders often experience?

Special treatment

The resurrection story of Jesus with Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome is beautiful. He chose these three to be his witnesses (16:1-7). The textbook would have recommended a different approach but here we have a beautiful picture of the pastor who goes out of his way to say something powerful through his gentle actions.

Are we prepared to do things differently at times and to be innovative in who we work with and how? Are we prepared to give privilege from time to time to those who would not expect it?

So, how can you use these with your various leaders in church? Which points need to be emphasised for you? Is it:

- Defining the group
- Clarifying the plan
- Being tough as a leader
- Being gentle as a leader?

Or all four?

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN120. See also Articles A12/13, *The leader as a shepherd,* and A45, *How to lead a team at church,* plus Training Notes TN43, *Did Jesus use an iPhone?,* TN87, *What to look for in your leaders,* TN94, *Becoming self-aware,* TN132, *What you look for in your Minister,* and TN151, *Loss of leadership passion.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN120 under Leadership (with a link to Management).

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