

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF LEADERSHIP

The following is an excerpt from the book,

So Many Leaders, So Little Leadership

I've often said in my purpose seminars that I've never looked for a job in my adult life. I don't have a resume and have never conducted a job search. When I've been unemployed, the phone has rung and someone has asked me to take over some position. I wish I could say that every transition has been an easy one, for it's a difficult thing for me, and I think for other leaders, to step out of leadership once a leader.

Someone has said that the best leaders are ones who also know how to follow. I can identify with anyone who follows, for I've done my share. I can relate to anyone who questions my leadership decisions, and I have lots of grace for a disgruntled follower. I may have to help that follower find another leader to follow, but I still have grace for where they are and what they're going through.

Daniel was a good follower and I think he knew how to step out of leadership gracefully after having enjoyed a leadership position. Part of the price of leadership is to not hold your leadership position too tightly. Otherwise, you may find yourself defending the top of your hill when it's really time to retreat and find another hill. I've counseled many leaders that the time to quit is when you're on top. If you do, someone may give you a lamp as a going-away present. If you wait too long, those same people may throw the lamp at you as you walk out the door!

Daniel had a distinguished career serving King Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar died, as all leaders eventually do, and his son Belshazzar took over for him. We read in Daniel 5 that this son threw a drinking party for his friends, using the

drinking utensils that his father had taken from Daniel's Israel. As Belshazzar and his friends drank, "they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone" (Daniel 5:4).

But suddenly their party was interrupted by an unexpected visitor.

Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together his legs gave way (Daniel 5:5-6).

So what did the king do? He called for all the wise men of Babylon and offered a large reward for anyone who could interpret the words that were written on the wall. All the wise men came, but no one could interpret the handwriting. As the king panicked, the queen came in and gave him some advice.

The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. . . . "There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father . . . appointed him chief of the magicians . . . Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means" (Daniel 5:10-12).

Now I ask you, where was Daniel? Why wasn't he already serving in the king's court? I believe that this new king removed Daniel from his position of leadership to make room for his own friends and advisers. The queen had to tell Belshazzar that Daniel even existed. Once the chief adviser under Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel was now in semi-retirement in some Babylonian assisted-living facility!

Daniel was a gracious man who didn't hold onto his leadership too tightly. He was able to go with the flow of promotion and demotion, the ebb and flow of leadership. When summoned to the king, Daniel came. Belshazzar offered him a large reward for interpreting the writing on the wall.

Now Daniel could have said, “Look, you fired me when you took over as king. You didn’t think you needed me, and now you call me when you’re in trouble. I see that you’re also using the drinking utensils that you stole from my nation when you brought me here. So I’m not going to interpret anything for you. Figure it out for yourself!”

Part of the price of leadership is to look past the insults, the oversights, and the inequities to lead when the need arises and the door opens. That’s what Daniel did. Then Daniel answered the king, “You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means” (Daniel 5:17). Daniel did just that and told the king the bad news that the days of his kingly reign were ended. That night, Belshazzar was assassinated! When the new king took over, he promoted Daniel back to his original position.

The more I lead, the less anxious I am to do so. I know I’m a leader, but sometimes I have to take a backseat and humble myself. Humility is a good trait for any leader to have, because it keeps the leader from having too high an opinion of his or her leadership. If you’re willing to give up your leadership, you won’t protect it at any cost. It keeps you from being corrupted by the power that comes with leadership. That can spare you, your followers and the organization you’re leading from a lot of pain.

I’ve had to walk away from more than a few leadership positions. Some of those transitions have been painful. I’ve tried in each case to make it easy for that to happen, to not let a power struggle occur. I’ve tried not to let followers sympathize with me to the point that they couldn’t follow the leader who replaced me. Finally, I’ve tried to stay on good terms with those who remained behind, offering my help and services if they were asked for (but then and only then).

I carry in my planner a poem by Rudyard Kipling entitled “IF.”. I’m not a big fan of poetry, but this poem has impacted my life and leadership.

If you can keep your head when all about you

Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,

But make allowance for their doubting, too;

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,

Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies;

Or being hated don’t give way to hating

And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;

If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

And treat those two imposters just the same;

If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken

Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,

Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,

And stoop and build ‘em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings

And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,

And lose, and start again at your beginnings

And never breathe a word about your loss;

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew

*To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them 'Hold on!'
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

I love the line that says “If you can meet Triumph and Disaster and treat those two imposters just the same.” I’m never as good or as bad as I think I am when I’m leading. Leadership success can be fleeting and failure, if not fatal. If I can keep that in mind, it will help me keep a proper perspective on what’s happening around me.

I also appreciate the picture painted by the phrase “If you can make one heap of all your winnings and risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss, and lose, and start again at your beginnings and never breathe a word about your loss.” There’s risk involved in leadership, and sometimes the risk doesn’t pan out as expected. But if I as a leader stop risking because I’m afraid of losing my “high position” or pension, then I’ve stopped being an effective leader. I’m not for reckless decisions, but I am for calculated risk that can lead to greater gain for followers and the organization I’m leading.

The price of leadership for Daniel was:

- Wisdom from experience
- Integrity
- Loss of leadership

As we close this study of leadership, I hope you've gained some new insights that will help you to become a better and more effective leader. I hope you realize that just because you're called a leader doesn't mean you're providing leadership to those around you. Leadership can come from anyone whether they're called leader or not, for those who serve, communicate, train, and build a team are the real leaders in any situation regardless of their title or salary.