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Learning the Skills of Leadership

Provision

At a discussion during a missionary conference dealing with contemporary problems of missionaries, a point was strongly made that in most countries of the world the expatriate missionary must encourage indigenous Christians to take responsibility for overseeing the life of the churches in the place of the missionary who has been accustomed to leading in practically all aspects of church life over many years. While that change of role was difficult enough for those who began to lead instead of to follow with the experienced missionary still around, the change of role for the missionary was even more difficult — to make useful contributions without intervening in the many aspects of the work and fellowship for which he had long felt responsible and which he had nurtured over many years. Whereas many expatriate business managers may simply be posted elsewhere when their national successors take over, the missionary may rightly feel the church and especially the new leaders need his continued support and service.

The veteran missionary who introduced the problem was asked if training would help missionaries, as it helps many others, to make one of the most difficult adjustments in human relationships, from being controller of a developing organisation to responding to others' directives and tendering advice only when sought. The answer given was that the Holy Spirit would give the needed grace. While it is wonderfully true that the servant of Christ often learns from his experience lessons about relationships more deeply and satisfactorily than those who do not hold Christian values, e.g. in regard to humility and loving service, was this a sufficient answer to a general problem acknowledged by the missionaries who had worked in other countries? Some may not need a school to teach them, but they are ready to learn from reading and observation and comments of respected friends. If there are ways of thinking about and doing these tasks which can be described, assessed, and communicated, why should they not be learnt from others? This should in no way limit their amazement at the mysterious way in which the Spirit works through their circumstances and in their souls to bring home to them the need and opportunity for these tasks. Among those who might be used to help are those with knowledge and experience of training in human relations.

Content

If it is accepted that training can help to discover and to develop a gift of

leadership, how is it to be done? First, it should be recognised that training which enhances understanding and skill in any function places the trainee in a good position to take leads in that function. So any training programme directed towards the appreciation of some aspect of church life and its active application is preparing him for leadership. If young Christians in the more affluent societies interrupt their secular studies or careers by a year or two at Bible colleges or if Christians in developing countries leave their farms for a few weeks of study or evangelistic activity, they should be more able and ready to serve their churches when they return. If the training is not too narrowly conceived around one aspect of Christian life and thought nor divorced from other aspects, and if it has not supplanted the trainee's dependence on God for guidance, the process of learning will have benefits whatever functions he subsequently undertakes in the church.

It is this kind of expertise which several missionary societies and other groups are offering under the heading of 'leadership training'. While they may be meeting the most urgent needs of the individuals and churches which they serve, this heading is misleading for whatever contribution is made to leadership is indirect. What they are doing is helping church members to be more effective in selected functions — as members rather than leaders, though they may select the most influential or the most promising in each church for this training. Whatever the concern of the church member — to evangelise children, to visit the sick, or to counsel married couples or those intending to marry — he (or she) can be helped to understand what is involved and how he might proceed and to develop strategies and skills to work effectively as well as heartily unto the Lord. Every member should be contributing to the work and fellowship of the church in some function, for every member has some spiritual and natural gifts and every member can be helped to improve his contribution. The whole church should be a learning community but not afraid to use or endorse outside help and opportunities where these are available.

Training — or simply providing opportunities and encouragement to learn — may not only enhance understanding and skill of some functions but may also help to confirm — or cast a doubt — that there is a spiritual gift for selected kinds of ministry. Gifts — natural and spiritual — are not easily identified until they have been practised for some time. First attempts at teaching, preaching, or counselling, for instance, are often seen to be failures and the beginners must often go through traumatic experiences before they gain much confidence in tackling their tasks.

How can we identify gift in ourselves or others? If we drew up a questionnaire asking questions about each of the gifts listed in the New Testament, and if we tried to check with ticks and crosses those gifts which we respectively have or have not, we all would have some difficulties in deciding how to mark our answers and some would be able to

put ticks where once they would have placed crosses. And if we had to label each gift as natural or spiritual we might find the task even harder. How often is spiritual gift anything more than a latent natural gift which is drawn out and developed by the Spirit? Certainly the elements of many named gifts are to be found among unbelievers though they may not be devoted to the same purposes or marked with the same graciousness. The recognition of spiritual gift does not usually come as a blinding flash either to the gifted or to those who invite them to teach a class of children or to preach the gospel or to speak in a newly acquired language. It usually means a growing interest, an awareness of need, painstaking work, and some painful or embarrassing experiences. Some never discover the gift because the risk of trying is too great and no encouragement or support is given. Others recognise a gift from God and are thankful for it but their apparent self-confidence seems to preclude any help from others. Much gift may remain dormant or underdeveloped unless the assembly offers discerning help — challenge to try and support to persevere.

While much gift is stimulated by those who share a local spiritual fellowship, for further development we may have to turn to outsiders who are similarly exercised or who have experience either with the particular gift which needs development or in helping others to acquire insights and skills. The sympathetic understanding of believers may encourage the acquisition of a foreign language, for example, but more practical help must come from experts or native speakers who may be unbelievers. Linguistic gift or any other should not be weakened but enhanced by good training or personal development programmes.

Now let us turn back from training in general to training in leadership. For this it is not sufficient to improve functional insights and skills, i.e. those directed to the tasks of the church, but there must be also a development of understanding of people and skill in dealing with them. This is needed for good following as well as good leading. Help is offered, for instance, to the young people from over thirty nations who must work together on the Operation Mobilisation ships. Though offered primarily to deal with current problems, it must have a very valuable contribution to make to their future work where they will have opportunities for leading.

There is a great danger in giving training in various useful functions and techniques and calling it leadership training without dealing adequately with human relationships, including insights into the trainee's own feelings and behaviour. In groups outside the church it is frequently found that the very knowledge of, and competence in, functional tasks blinds would-be leaders to their failures in human relations, either because they fail to diagnose the situation, especially feelings towards the task, the organisation, or the claimant to authority, or because they fail to maintain the goodwill and confidence of others in their leadership. In

the church we may reasonably expect love to overcome many of these common difficulties but it does not remove them. To deny them or ignore them is to perpetuate them and so to make difficulties for the future. For example, if my concern for others leads me to take a patronising approach towards them and I never realise that they feel humiliated as a consequence, I may continue in this attitude not only towards those who humbly accept my behaviour but also towards others whom it provokes to resentment. To allow me to remain unaware of others' perception of this approach would be to discourage others from taking leads. What I need is not only some understanding of how people in general relate, but more especially an awareness of my own self in relation to particular people around me and an ability to work constructively and continuously with them in building better ongoing relationships. Perhaps more than in any other form of training, the learner is laying himself on the line, risking both his reputation and his self-esteem, but the intrinsic satisfaction and the extrinsic achievement can compensate overwhelmingly for the pain.

Methods

How can this understanding of people and this skill in dealing with others be developed? First, we should recognise that many people become wiser and abler in this area without embracing the Christian faith. Nevertheless it is reasonable to expect Christians who attempt to develop their interpersonal competence to learn more readily than others because they start with a genuine concern for their fellows and a realistic assessment of human nature as having high potential but low tendencies. This expectation is not always met because Christians may be more concerned to maintain their religious reputations and self-confidence than to risk a more open style of relating to others, even in training experiments. The characterisation of religious people in fiction and satirical humour as rigid and uptight is not without justification; they have, of course, more concern to defend dogma and to uphold morals than others and fear being caught out and dragged down by providers of human relations training who hold humanist values or tolerate a looser morality. There is surely a middle way between the uptightness which denies the complexity of human interchange and the licence which denies moral responsibility.

Some Christians may gain by training with others who do not share their faith, though the clash of values and behavioural standards may be greater in this area than in other areas of training because it is concerned with human nature, morality, and motivation — not someone else's but their own. Nevertheless the clash can be constructive and permit a declaration and strengthening of Christian values in the encounter. Other Christians, however, may learn more profitably by meeting together,

even as members of the same church. Though 'family groups' of trainees, drawn from and returning to the same background situation, have greater fears of offending one another, they find it easier to transfer learning to daily practice because they have been through the same training experience together and are constantly reminded of it by one another's presence. On the other hand 'stranger groups', drawn from different, if similar, background situations are separated from one another after training, though they may keep in touch to give one another support in their respective spheres; but, while their training is more difficult to apply, they are usually willing to take more risks and so learn deeper lessons.

Just as one cannot learn to live a holy life simply by listening to others and reading what they have written (despite the revolutionary impact of such devotional works as open the mind and heart to the Spirit), so one cannot learn to be effective in reaching one's objectives through dealings with others from lectures or handouts. That does not mean that information and viewpoints are not helpful in relationship training, but it does mean that they are not sufficient. Their usefulness depends on how the listener or reader has been prepared to receive what is spoken or written. He comes to training with patterns of thought, opinion, and prejudice developed from his own experiences and hearsay. Many of his ideas have been picked up from the media in a selective, often distorted, fashion, so his assessment of the lecture or handout may be radically different from those made by other listeners or readers. Much of the information about human relations is therefore best left until after other training experiences have developed an interest in receiving it, i.e. until he has ears to hear.

There is still a widespread assumption that adults learn chiefly by listening to lengthy explanations and harangues. Many students have already been conditioned to accept this method when they arrive at college from school and resent any challenge to think for themselves. This attitude is reinforced if they discover that their graduation with an entrance ticket to other social groups is dependent not on understanding but on learning the terminology and tales of the examiner. Many others, however, find attendance at lectures is so boring that they either treat it as a ritual to be endured in order to secure their prized ticket or absent themselves as much as possible in order to turn to other occupations, including more rewarding ways of learning.

Yet, as this chapter is being written, a mature entrant to one of the fighting forces, in describing an officer training course, spoke of the boring, often irrelevant, presentations made by one-way communication after an exciting five-day pioneering exercise in which the trainees themselves had organised an expedition to an isolated retreat. With this widespread deference to the lecture in our educational and training system, it is then not such a matter of astonishment that brochures advertising

Christian leadership training seem to give this method prominence. Perhaps if they did not do so, no trainees would be forthcoming. If those who feel a need for training believe that lectures — or sermons — develop people, then this is an easy low-risk method of being developed. In other walks of life where the propagandist does not have a captive or captivated audience, he has almost abandoned the long speech. Only when the politician, for instance, addresses his supporters or an interested informed public can he now talk at length, for otherwise the panel chairman or the listener will cut him off.

In the field of human relationships as distinct from learning other aspects or forms of ministry there is very limited use for the lecture or for a paper such as this — perhaps initially to demonstrate what it is possible to learn and then to whet the appetite for exploration by other means. Essential is an exercise or interchange which will expose characteristics of perception, belief, and behaviour for examination by the trainees themselves, giving them opportunity to assess what kind of information they want and to experiment with changes.

One feature of learning methods which is critical in leadership training is the extent to which trainees are given or permitted to take responsibility for the learning, including control of the learning situation. At one end of the responsibility continuum is the lecture presented to an unseen or unresponsive audience which might be willing to attend or to switch on, and at the other there is the project devised and undertaken by trainees themselves with a trainer or other resource personnel available on appointment. In between we can place questions to the lecturer, discussion on general or theoretical issues, discussions of specific cases, role-play where the trainees enter into other people's situations, exercises involving interaction or self-examination, guided projects requiring practical applications to specific problems, and self-examination or group examination of the trainees' own behaviour and feelings. The precise order in which we place these methods on the continuum of participation and control depends on how they are used and the interpersonal style developed between trainer and trainees over time, for openness of communication is not to be measured by the number of words each party speaks to the other, but rather by the feeling that whatever is said or indicated will be accepted and respected. Some openness of style is required as trainers move along the continuum to share more responsibility and control with the trainees, because usually the issues to be faced become more specific and more personal. This the trainee finds challenging — sometimes daunting, when the risk of pain seems to outweigh the prospect of exciting discovery — and he needs to feel as a rule that some support is available from other trainees or his trainer operating, as it were, a dual driving system or at least a safety net. Because leading involves risk — that judgements of what is required and how others will respond are sound — and because the leader stands alone, the trainee

must learn to accept responsibility and to take control with little support. For this reason the training methods are as important as the training content: the medium is the message.

Setting

There has in recent years been a developing interest in on-the-job training for adults after an earlier upsurge in separated training centres and country residences. Going away from the situation in which one has been living and working has advantages — easier organisation for a large group, specialist help, emotional detachment from the familiar situation, intense involvement in learning, interchange with other learners, and a controlled environment providing both challenge and support. But, as with astronauts, the looser the ties with the old situation, the greater is the re-entry problem. Application of the new learning — whether concepts, insights, awareness, or skills — to the old situation is difficult because it is very different from the experience of training and there are few people around who have sufficient understanding of what the learning experience was. Instead of giving the needed support, those who have stayed in the old situation will often feel threatened by perceived or imagined changes in the returning trainee. Even more than in the detached training setting the trainee needs challenge and support during the process of applying his learning, if it is to have any permanent impact. Few practitioners have sufficient resources in themselves to develop to their full potential, though in the church we have evidence of work within us which exceeds our requests and even our imagination (Eph. 3:20). God brings both the challenge and the support we need for development — in love and in leadership — but we should not be surprised if he gives them through human agency, particularly through fellow believers.

Such support is especially needed, at hand if not always in use, when practical training reaches a stage where learning is inseparable from the performance of a needed task. If learning is the primary objective, the task is called a 'project', whereas if achievement is the primary objective, the learning is labelled 'on-the-job'. In both cases there is a need for a debriefing during or after the task to recall the experience and to clarify the learning. This can be done by writing a private diary, but for most this is not as effective as talking or writing to an adviser, an interviewer, or an official listener or correspondent, for learning is usually a social process. The helper does not need to be more experienced or have greater knowledge or higher status than the learner: he just needs sympathy or empathy and the desire to understand. It is even more encouraging if the learner and helper can at times reverse roles, that is in an elementary way to be co-counsellors. Those who take time to develop relationships of this kind with a brother or a sister find it very rewarding and stimulating.

Moreover it can enrich the whole of the fellowship of a church, for it is truly a carrying of each other's burdens (Gal. 6:2). The process of helping one another to learn should not stop when a recognised training programme has formally ended. We need continuous help in learning when and how to lead and when and how to follow. The church should be a learning community: this is a very important aspect of continuing in fellowship (Act 2:42).

Further reading

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| J. ADAIR 1968/74
Macdonald & Jane's | <i>Training for leadership</i> |
| C. L. COOPER (Ed) 1976
Macmillan | <i>Developing social skills in managers</i> |
| F. E. FIEDLER 1976
Wiley | <i>Improving leadership effectiveness: the leader match concept</i> |
| N. RACKHAM, P. HONEY & P. COLBERT
Wellens Publishing | <i>Developing interactive skills</i> |
| W. J. REDDIN & R. STUART-KOTZE 1974
Organizational Effectiveness Ltd | <i>Effective situational diagnosis</i> |
| C. R. ROGERS 1973
Penguin | <i>Encounter groups</i> |
| B. TAYLOR & G. L. LIPPITT 1975
McGraw-Hill | <i>Management development and training handbook</i> |