

Leadership and Forgiveness :

An extract from "Relational Leadership" by Walter C Wright. Published by Paternoster Press, 2000.

Forgiving Leaders

Last year the editor of a weekly newspaper called to ask me to write an article in response to the accusation that there is a crisis in leadership in higher education in Canada. A scholar had noted the number of advertisements for deans and presidents and concluded that there must be crisis. I wrote the article, responding that there might in fact be a crisis but not the one the scholar had imagined. I noted that there was no shortage of opportunities for leadership in higher education as advertised. I also suggested that there was no shortage of capable people ready to serve organizations and work hard for the vision and values of their institutions. But I did acknowledge that leaders do not last long in higher education. In the field of theological education for example, presidents last four years and deans less than three years on average. After eleven years as president, I am considered one of the veterans - a frightening thought! The crisis of leadership, I believe, is a crisis of forgiveness. Leaders are expected to lead without mistakes. There is very little tolerance for error in our organizations, very little acknowledgement of the human limitations of leaders. Organizations want leaders whom they can place before them to bear the burden of decision without error. Errorless leadership is an oxymoron. You may have heard the story of the young executive who sought out the gruff old corporate leader and asked, 'How can I become a great leader like you?' The senior statesman looked at her and said gruffly, 'Two words: Good decisions!' After pondering this wisdom for a minute the young executive asked, 'How do I learn to make good decisions?' The veteran leader paused and responded, 'One word: Experience!' Persisting, the young executive asked, 'But how do I get this experience?' And as you can already guess, the leader turned to her and said, 'Two words: Wrong decisions!' Leaders lead by learning from their mistakes. And leaders develop other leaders by giving the people for whom they are responsible the space to fail and to learn.

Towards the end of my interview with the board at Regent, I was given the opportunity to ask them some questions. I asked, 'What will you do when I fail? I have never been a president before. I will make mistakes. Will you toss me out when I fall on my face or will you dust me off, stand me up and encourage me to try again?' They did not really have an answer for me at the time, but perhaps the pondering of that question is part of the reason I am still there - still leading, still making mistakes, and still learning from them.

Organizations must create a context of forgiveness if they expect to have quality leadership. And leaders must embrace their own vulnerability and offer forgiveness to followers if they want to contribute to that context of forgiveness and nurture the leadership abilities of their people. Forgiveness may be the most important gift an organization can give to its leaders, and the most important gift a leader can give to the people for whom he or she is responsible. Forgiveness offers people the chance to take risks, to learn and to grow in their own leadership within the organization. Leaders need forgiveness given their own vulnerability and it is something they must offer others, even though others' failures increase the leaders' vulnerability.

Forgiving ourselves

But there is one more thread in this tapestry of leadership, vulnerability and forgiveness. *Leaders must be able to forgive themselves.* This may be the hardest of all. All of us are haunted by the foolish things we have done, the mistakes we have made, the failures of yesterday. Our ability to lead is directly proportional to our ability to forgive ourselves and risk failure again. If our actions are circumscribed by fear of failure, we cannot lead. Failure must be forgiven and learned from. And there is no one harder to forgive than oneself.

In 1928 General Umberto Nobile led an Italian expedition to the North Pole. With the famed explorer Finn Malmgren, Nobile and his men flew the airship *Italia* from Kongs Fjord in the Norwegian Arctic to the North Pole. The expedition succeeded in reaching the Pole but ended in a tragedy similar to the Everest expeditions of 1996. In 1969 this story was told by Hollywood in a dramatic feature film *The Red Tent*, starring Peter Finch, Sean Connery and Claudia Cardinale. I use this film in my leadership class at Regent. Though nearly thirty years old, the film is still dramatic and engaging, and it is all about leadership. A court sat in judgement on Nobile's leadership, and now all the witnesses are conjured up again in Nobile's mind as he looks back on the expedition as an old man. In his fantasy Nobile reviews the story through the eyes of each of its characters as he seeks to pass judgement on his leadership and his failure. It is a very powerful film. As I show the movie in class, I stop the film at three critical points where the general must make a decision and ask the class what they would do. At the end, before the summary judgement is given, I stop again and ask the students to assess his leadership. If they truly wrestle with the decisions along the way, they are much less certain how to evaluate him at the end.

From the beginning of the movie Nobile has a vision, a dream, of landing on the North Pole. He is captured by his vision and exudes his sense of purpose at every point. It is contagious and his men are caught up in the pursuit of this vision. I stop the tape and ask my class - as I would ask you: Do you have a vision for what you want to accomplish? For your life? For your organization? For your department? Do you live your vision with such vigour that your people have caught it and share your enthusiasm?

As the movie continues, Nobile and his crew arrive at the North Pole and prepare to land. However, at that moment the weather turns - again like Everest - and he must make a hard decision: does he land and accomplish his mission for his country or does he abort the landing and return to Kings Bay (as Kongs Fjord is referred to in the movie) to guarantee the safety of his men? His second-in-command, Major Zappi, states it clearly: 'A leader's responsibility is to his mission - you must land.' But the explorer Malmgren counters, 'No, a leader's responsibility is always to his men - you must return to King's Bay.' Again, I stop the tape and we decide. Vision or values? What will you do?

General Nobile makes his decision and crashes on the Arctic ice, killing several members of his expedition. Huddled on the ice in a red tent, the story becomes a chilling tale of survival, heroism and rescue, with more critical decisions for the general. In the end Nobile is judged for the decisions he makes. But the judgement of history does not haunt him. It is Nobile who cannot forgive himself. Forty years later he is still having nightmares about that trip, about his leadership, about his failures. Only when he faces the harsh reality in a poignant and powerful conclusion can he admit his failure, affirm his accomplishment, accept the judgement of history on his leadership, forgive himself and sleep again.

This is a powerful movie about the vision, values and vulnerability of leadership, a strong statement about the critical relationship between leadership and forgiveness. Relational leadership is a risky business. We are entrusted with a vision; we are entrusted with the dreams and gifts and hopes of the people. We are accountable to God and to the organization. We will fail and others will fail us. Without the hope of forgiveness, we would never have the courage to take up leadership - to offer ourselves as servants of the shared vision and the shared values of our organizations. Without forgiveness, we would never commit ourselves to the interdependent relationships of our communities. But forgiveness comes with the gift of leadership. It is the empowering side of accountability. And forgiveness flows from the heart of the leader's relationship with God.

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