

Leadership Qualities: Structure & Organization

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In the winter of 1988, nuns of the Missionaries of Charity were walking through the snow in the South Bronx in their saris and sandals looking for an abandoned building that they might convert into a homeless shelter. Mother Theresa, the Nobel Prize winner and head of the order, had agreed on a plan with Mayor Ed Koch after visiting him in the hospital several years earlier.

The nuns found two fire-gutted buildings on 148th Street, and the city of New York offered the buildings to the mission at one dollar each. The Missionaries of Charity set aside \$500,000 for reconstruction. The plan was to create a facility that would provide temporary care for 64 homeless men. The buildings would provide a communal setting that included a dining room and kitchen on the first floor, a lounge on the second floor and small dormitory rooms on the third and fourth floors. The members of the order, in addition to taking a vow of poverty, avoid the routine use of modern conveniences. As a result, the facility would have no dishwashers or other appliances, and laundry would be done by hand. For New York City, the proposed homeless facility was a godsend.

Then Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity encountered the bureaucracy of New York City. For a year and a half, the nuns, wanting only to live lives of service, found themselves traveling from hearing room to hearing room, presenting the details of the project. In September 1989, the city finally approved the plan, and the Missionaries of Charity began repairing the fire-damaged buildings.

Then, after almost two years, the nuns were told that according to New York's building code every new or renovated multi-story building must have an elevator. The Missionaries of Charity explained that because of their beliefs they would never use the elevator, which would

add an additional \$100,000 to the cost of the project. The nuns were told the law could not be waived even if the elevator would not be used.

Mother Theresa gave up. She could not, in good conscience, devote that much extra money to something that would not really help the poor. According to her representative, “The Sisters felt they could use the money much more usefully for soup and sandwiches.” In a polite letter to the city expressing their regrets, the Missionaries of Charity noted that the episode “served to educate us about the law and its many complexities.”

As Philip K. Howard observes, no person decided to spite Mother Theresa. It was just the law. Yet he argues that the story of the Missionaries of Charity in New York reflects how rules can replace thinking. The result is what Howard calls “the death of common sense.”¹

Structure is crucial because it is structure that supports and facilitates the purposes and mission of an organization.² We may think of structure functioning the way a skeleton serves a human body – it holds together and supports the working parts of the body in order to enable them to function as a body. But, as the story of Mother Theresa and the Missionaries of Charity illustrates, bureaucracy can become stifling and an organization’s mission can actually be hindered by its structure.

The Importance of Structure

Organizations are good. They gather multiple resources and focus them on a mutually desirable outcome. Well-fed organizations can accomplish far more than any individual can hope to accomplish alone. That’s the truth. But how many organizations are anything *but* organized? Some successful businesses are purposely keeping their operations very small. Some

¹ The story of Mother Theresa was adapted from Philip K. Howard, *The Death of Common Sense: How Law Is Suffocating America* (New York: Random House, 1994), 3-4.

² On the importance and relevance of church structure see Bobb Biehl, *Masterplanning: The Complete Guide for Building a Strategic Plan for Your Business, Church or Organization* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997).

entrepreneurs even insist on working alone, because they feel that bigger is *anything* but better. Exodus 18:1-27 shows us that this doesn't have to be the case.

Moses was overwhelmed by the problems of leading a large number of people. Looking at a map, after the people had crossed the Red Sea, it would have made more sense to travel north to the Promised Land, particularly considering Moses was leading a mass of people the size of a major American city. The best estimate is that nearly two million people came out of Egypt. They would soon need food and water, not just for themselves but for their livestock. But the cloud of God's presence moved south (Exodus 13:17-22). As their leader, Moses had no recourse but to follow God's leading.

So the people walked straight into the wilderness. Anyone tracking their movements may have thought this was irrational and irresponsible. But the writer of Hebrews makes it clear that the children of Israel were following God by faith (Hebrews 11:27-29).

Still, walking by faith doesn't guarantee a shortcut to spiritual maturity. It wasn't long before the people began complaining because the water was so bitter they couldn't drink it (Exodus 15:22-24). Moses took the request to God, who provided a solution (v. 25). Then the people began to complain about the scarcity of food (16:1-3). Once again, God met their need, providing food them with manna from heaven. For the next 40 years, God would always provide manna – even though they were frequently disobedient (16:1-36).

The people then came to Rephidim, where there was no water at all. Rather than remember God's provision at Marah, they "quarreled with Moses" (17:2) and complained to the point that they actually threatened to stone Moses. God once more responded to Moses' cry for help by providing water from a rock (17:6).

Next, the Amalekites attacked, threatening to destroy the people. God delivered them from the Amalekites miraculously. As long as Aaron and Hur held up Moses' hands, the children of Israel prevailed. Finally at sunset, "Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword" (17:13).

Needless to say, things were a bit overwhelming for Moses. The school of leadership God had enrolled him in had a difficult and daunting sequence of coursework. Eventually, he led them back to the exact spot where God had first spoken to him from a burning bush: Mount Horeb – also called the "mountain of God" (3:1; 18:5). Here the people set up camp and settled down for a while. Here, also, Moses enjoyed a reunion with his wife, sons and father-in-law, Jethro (18:5-6).

The day after the reunion, Jethro watched Moses' activity. All day long he watched Moses deal with the problems of the people. One after another they came to Moses seeking help and advice for dealing with personal, family and social problems (vv. 13-16). By the end of the day, Moses was exhausted, but many of the people were still frustrated, having stood in line all day without having a chance to ask Moses their questions.

Jethro said, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone" (vv. 17-18). Then Jethro came up with an idea and invented what has become a thriving profession: he is history's first recorded management consultant. He helped Moses to see that organization and structure are essential to effective operation. Not only is work accomplished more efficiently, but people are better served and supported in doing the work. Here is Jethro's plan:

"Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all

the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.”

Exodus 18:19-21

Basically the plan had three facets. First, Moses should *mediate* between the people and God; that would be his primary role – to seek God’s will for the people (v. 19). Second, Moses would *communicate* God’s message to the people (v. 20). Finally, Moses would *delegate* responsibility to others who could solve the day-to-day problems (v. 21). Only the most serious problems would be brought to Moses for his wisdom and counsel. Jethro concluded, “If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied” (v. 23).³

Moses discovered the importance of organizational structure when he was still a fledgling leader. The principle embodied here is that *effective leaders create a structure that nurtures the health of those they lead*. Moses did that by hand-picking potential leaders, training them and empowering them. Moses teaches us that key leaders can still maintain some control – when problems arose, he acted as a final arbiter. But through effective delegation a leader can multiply his or her effectiveness and better meet the needs of those who require personal attention.

It’s worth noting that the idea for the organizational structure didn’t come from Moses but from his father-in-law, Jethro. By this time, Moses had become a mature man of God, both psychologically and spiritually. Jethro, on the other hand, had just become a believer in Yahweh (vv. 8-12). Moses, being a humble man, did not allow pride to prevent him from accepting a good idea when he heard it. A strong leader is approachable and willing to allow others to tweak the structure of his or her organization, if doing so will strengthen it. No matter how mature we may think we are, we should remain open to advice from others – even unlikely people.

³ This summary of Jethro’s plan is adapted from Gene A Getz, *Moses* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), pp. 93-103.

The God of Order

The cosmos is a *universe*, not a *multiverse*. The created order is replete with evidence of intelligent design, and even the simplest living system – let alone the human brain – is more complex and subtle than the most sophisticated computer yet devised. It should come as no surprise, then, that the God of the Bible uses structure and organization to accomplish his many purposes. Revelation 4:2-11 gives us a glimpse of God’s magnificent heavenly order:

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

John’s vision of the heavenly throne symbolically describes what is beyond human comprehension, but this passage furnishes us with a glimpse of the degree of symmetry and

hierarchical order that surrounds the manifest presence of the eternal God. The encircling emerald-like rainbow, the seven spirits of God, the 24 elders, the four living creatures, the sea of glass, the solemn worship – all of these things speak of form, dignity, power and a harmoniously structured society.

Revelation 5:11-14 reinforces this impression with its description of the awesome throne and innumerable angelic host that encircles the throne and worships the Father and the Son:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!”

The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

God’s penchant for structure, beauty and harmony is also suggested in Paul’s description of Christ as the creator and sustainer of all things:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:16-17

Notice how the words *thrones*, *powers*, *rulers* and *authorities* are used in this passage to portray the angelic hierarchy (compare Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; 6:12). Christ integrates, orders and

sustains all things; his power guarantees that the universe is under control and not chaotic. If he is in control, then the universe becomes a perfectly safe place for us to be.

Consider Genesis 1:1-2:3 from the standpoint of creation's structure and organization. Notice how God's creative activity overcame the formless and empty conditions of Genesis 1:2. God's work always brings order out of chaos, thus bringing us, filled with awe and wonder, to a greater appreciation of his power and creativity. Luder Whitlock writes,

The creation of the universe not only attests to the supreme omnipotence of God, it also displays his creativity in all its glory, for God is the author of beauty as well as truth. In traveling the world, you cannot escape being struck by its natural beauty. We sing of purple mountains' majesty profiled against the beautiful blue spacious skies that stretch from sea to shining sea. We capture its essence in other ways as well: the gurgle of the cold, frothy, mountain brook; the dramatic burst of yellow forsythia emerging from the drab bleakness of winter; the translucent beauty of a rainbow perched in the sky; the magnificent grandeur of a colossal waterfall; or the winter wonderland created by a fresh snowfall. Add to that the graceful glide of a deer through dappled woods, the proud strut of a prairie partridge, or the cute antics of a playful, young puppy. Then close your eyes and listen to the rhythmic pounding of the surf or the whisper of the wind in the palms. What a magnificent creation – the work of the quintessential artist!⁴

The God of infinite variety and bold creativity is also a God of order. He brings light into darkness and structure out of confusion. This is not only true of the cosmos; it is true of a human life. The chaos of our life is transmuted into the order of God's beauty as we allow him to reign and rule in our lives, submitting to his tutelage.

Structure in the Church

Just as God turns chaos into form, structure and resplendent beauty, so he calls upon those who have been created in his image to order and shape their own inner and outer worlds. Through

⁴ Luder G. Whitlock, Jr., *The Spiritual Quest* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 143.

discipline and skill we can bring greater structure and harmony into our personal and social environments.

Paul gives us a valuable glimpse into the public worship of the first-century churches in 1 Corinthians 14. This chapter stresses that order, structure, form, unity, like-mindedness and mutual regard should prevail in the midst of diversity when believers gather together. “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (v. 40) since “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (v. 33).

This is not to suggest that unity implies uniformity or that order squelches spontaneity. As Lyle Vander Broek points out:

Peace, used in this context, refers to diverse elements working in harmony. Paul’s obvious intent in this section is to make a statement about the importance of order in worship..., but diversity is not sacrificed to that order.... Those of us who insist that all things in the church be done “decently and in order” need to be reminded that order is defined by the Spirit’s control of us, not our control of the Spirit.⁵

Although it must not become an obsession, order is vital for a church’s health. Still, organization must serve the organism, not strangle it. Even the early house churches observed a pattern for worship, but it was one that encouraged each member of the body of believers to use their individual spiritual gifts in the most mutually edifying manner. Included in the early church order was a clear structure of leadership and a set of apostolic guidelines to prevent disorder and confusion in the assemblies of believers and to encourage a high level of involvement. This is why the apostle Paul instructed his associates Timothy and Titus concerning worship, leadership, organization and administration of the churches, as well as teaching them how to deal with the various groups within the assemblies.

⁵ Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Breaking Barriers* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), pp. 142, 150.

Structure and Adaptation

Organizations are important; they help us to achieve some of the most important outcomes by structuring multiple resources around a common task. But at times the very organization that is created to serve becomes an obstacle to the organization's purpose. Numbers 11:10-17 illustrates how structure should serve rather than dominate an enterprise:

Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. He asked the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant...? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now – if I have found favor in your eyes – and do not let me face my own ruin."

The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone."

Structure addresses the methods by which resources flow through the organization to accomplish work. The Bible addresses structure in relation to Israel's governance, the Levitical priesthood and order in the church, the home and the workplace. According to Scripture, God has instituted authority structures in the spheres of marriage, parenting, the church and the state. While sinful self-centeredness has led to frequent abuse of authority within these spheres, these structures have proven necessary to stem the tide of anarchy and lawlessness that would otherwise prevail in a society of fallen people. But apart from guidelines as to how the priests must relate to each other and to their work, the Bible's instructions about organization are intentionally non-specific, leaving room for freedom and adaptation.

Even when Paul wrote to churches or pastors, he didn't spell out in detail how the church should be structured. That is why the church has, over the years and across different cultures, adapted to fit the specific circumstances in which it finds itself. That's why, as a church grows, and its needs become more complex, the structure can adjust. A church can grow from 20 people to 2,000, and when the organizational structure no longer works, it can (and should) change. This pattern is healthy for any enterprise. Structure exists to enable resources of power and information to flow through an organization. Organizational structure is not sacred or set in concrete. If it doesn't work anymore, it should be changed.

Even though the Bible doesn't necessarily address specifics, it does address the manner in which people within the structure are to relate to each other. Leaders are to love and serve their followers; in turn, followers are to love one another and follow their leaders. The leader's specific place on a chart is not nearly as important as the relationship that exists between that leader and those he or she is commissioned to lead.

When Moses couldn't handle all of the responsibilities of leading Israel, God told him to enlist 70 qualified persons, empower them and allow them to help to carry the burden. No organizational charts, no "Who reports to whom?" questions. God perceived that Moses was overwhelmed and the people under-served. So he simply designed a system to enable people to be heard and legitimate power to be available to ensure that their concerns could be addressed. It wasn't about "Who's the boss?" It was about, "Who's going to serve these people so they can get on with their lives?" So simple...yet so profound.

Structuring For Mission

What kind of structure does an organization require in order to function effectively? Scripture doesn't provide us with any rock-solid systems for organizational structure. Why? *Because no*

such structures exist. Organizational structure is designed to channel resources to meet the task and mission of the organization. As such, it must change as resources and tasks ebb and flow. Moses discovered that getting the people out of Egypt required one kind of leadership; leading through the wilderness for 40 years required a completely different kind of leadership structure. Standing on the edge of the Promised Land, he sees that his decision to accept his father-in-law's advice was a wise plan:

At that time I said to you, "You are too heavy a burden for me to carry alone. The Lord your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as many as the stars in the sky. May the Lord, the God of your fathers, increase you a thousand times and bless you as he has promised! But how can I bear your problems and your burdens and your disputes all by myself? Choose some wise, understanding and respected men from each of your tribes, and I will set them over you."

You answered me, "What you propose to do is good."

So I took the leading men of your tribes, wise and respected men, and appointed them to have authority over you – as commanders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens and as tribal officials. And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it. And at that time I told you everything you were to do.

Deuteronomy 1:9-18

When the work overwhelmed Moses, God (through Jethro) encouraged him to create an organizational structure. But in Israel, as in the church and any other enterprise, the structure exists for one purpose: to channel resources toward accomplishing the organization's mission.

Kennon Callahan offers "Five Criteria for Structures for Mission."⁶ Callahan writes about churches structuring themselves for mission. But his ideas can be helpful for any organization. His criteria for building an organizational structure that promotes mission endeavors are paraphrased below:

⁶ The following material is adapted from Kennon Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

1. Structures are relative, not absolute. In all spheres of life, we discover and seize upon one particular way of ordering and structuring our work and life. One way works for a time. Then it becomes dysfunctional. A new structure is invented to take its place.
2. Structures are dynamic and flexible, not historified; they are not fixated in relation to a point in history. At their best, structures grow and develop.
3. Structures are local, not hierarchical. Callahan believes that a church needs the freedom to structure for its local situation instead of adopting a hierarchical structure that works somewhere else. That “means creating church structures that maximize both the power of the local participants and their fullest human potential.”
4. Structures for mission are connected, not centralized. “Local” does not mean isolationist. We do not live in a vacuum. Local “hands-on” mission most frequently leads to world mission.
5. Structures are missional, not institutional. Although this distinction appears self-evident, many organizational structures are devoted primarily to the institution.

Structure can either serve the group or bring it to a standstill. It can energize a business or lead it toward ever deeper levels of discouragement. It can enable men and women to use their gifts and abilities for the overall goal of the community or tie the hands and frustrate the most dedicated efforts of those people.

If not carefully examined, structure can become an end unto itself. Rather than the structure serving the organization, the organization begins to serve the structure. “How things are done,” writes Philip Howard, “has become far more important than what is done.... Process now has become an end in itself.”⁷

As an example, Howard cites the repair of the Carroll Street Bridge in Brooklyn, New York. Built in 1889, it was the nation’s first retractable bridge. By the mid-1980’s, it was in such disrepair that it could not carry traffic. In 1988 the city budgeted \$3.5 million for an overhaul. Due to various procedures and policies, it was determined that bidding would take two years followed by five years for the work itself. But with the bridge’s 100th anniversary coming

⁷ Howard, *The Death of Common Sense*, p. 60.

up, Sam Schwartz, the deputy commissioner responsible for bridges, called in his chief engineer and asked him to draw up a repair plan, ignoring the contracting procedures. He also asked him to throw in architectural decoration, which was not part of the original repair plan.

Schwartz got the money; he got the contracts, and only 11 months later at a cost of only \$2.5 million, the bridge was fixed up in time for its centennial birthday. As a reward for completing the job in one-seventh of the time and at 70% of the budget, Deputy Commissioner Schwartz received an official reprimand.⁸ As Howard observes, “The procedures Schwartz ignored – over 35 steps, involving six agencies and generally taking at least two years before any work can begin – exist to ensure complete neutrality and to protect against fraud. The fact that Schwartz was willing to stand up and take responsibility (and saved the city an estimated \$1 million) was irrelevant. The ritual had been violated.”⁹

Clearly, God is a God of structure and organization – one look around the cosmos demonstrates that. As men and women created in his image, we are also people of structure and organization. However, we do not share God’s immutability. Only he is unchanging. His plans never fail, but ours do and need to be changed from time to time. Structure is good insofar as it enables us to meet the goals and objectives of our mission. Once that is no longer the case, we must call upon the living and powerful God who acts among and through his people to give us new structures and a sense of resourcefulness equal to the challenges before us and worthy of the mission entrusted to us.

⁸ Ibid., 64-65.

⁹ Ibid., 65.