

Leadership Qualities: Systems Thinking

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According to a popular story, a great orchestra had gathered to rehearse with the celebrated conductor Sir Michael Costa. As the music reached a crescendo, every instrument was being played – except for one. Distracted, the piccolo player had momentarily lost his place on the page of music. He hoped his instrument wouldn't be missed. Suddenly, Costa brought down his arm and silenced the orchestra. "Where's the piccolo?" he inquired. To a skilled conductor, and a skilled leader, every part of the system is crucial – even those that may seem less important.

Many Parts; One Body

This is the point being made by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12,

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?

1 Corinthians 12:12-17

Paul observed that, even though Christ's body is comprised of many members, it is, like the human body, still *one* body. And even though that body encompasses great diversity, every member is equally a part.

Paul's point has nothing to do with human anatomy. In fact, the Greek word Paul uses here for "body" is *soma*, which reflects a wide range of meaning. Throughout Paul's writings, this word refers to the complete person, a being in totality, man as a whole. He isn't referring to

our shell, our earth-suit; he's referring to our identity. German theologian Rudolf Bultmann would go so far as to say, "Man does not *have* a *soma*; he *is soma*."¹

Paul wanted to ensure that every follower of Christ will feel important, will be assured that his or her contribution is crucial.

But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

1 Corinthians 12:18-27

No one has the right to act as though he or she is separate from the body. Nor may the members of Christ's body envy one another. The church is an organism, bound together in a synergistic fashion. The various parts of the body work together, in a coherent manner, to such a degree that there is no way of differentiating between the larger whole and the smaller parts. The total is greater than the sum of the parts.

While we may wish that we (or others) were different, the bottom line is that God created each of us just as he wanted us to be (v. 18) and calls upon each of us to faithfully serve according to our unique calling. We are part of something that's bigger than us. That should give us a sense of real significance. We're not alone; rather, we're part of an organic entity of human beings, part of a heavenly family that will never die. We are not called the *persons* of

¹ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament, I*, trans. By Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 194.

God; we are called the *people* of God. None of us suffers or rejoices without it having an impact on the rest of us. As Gilbert Bilezikian writes, “The ultimate purpose for individual piety is to enrich the life of the community and to bring biblical ‘fullness’ to it... Authentic redemption moves from personal salvation to inclusive fullness in community and in corporate ministry.”² As leaders, we’re to view every member of our team as a crucial part of the system, to help each individual to discover his or her role and play it.

Also, leaders must work diligently to achieve and maintain a proper sense of balance. For instance, some churches emphasize truth more than love, while others focus so much on love that they begin to compromise the truth. However, Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:15 to speak “the truth in love,” maintaining the balance of both. By doing so, he says, “we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” Balance is a key component to systemic maturity. He completes his thought by saying, “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

God has given every Christian a combination of gifts and opportunities that is uniquely suited to his or her situation in life. Every believer is a minister with a special contribution to make to the body of Christ. The central focus of our ministries will depend on the spiritual gifts we have received. Thus the discovery, cultivation and employment of the gifts of the Spirit is a necessary and worthwhile activity. However, the spiritual gifts are a means to an end. We should never forget this. The end is maturity. Gene Getz reminds us where our focus ought to be when he writes, “[T]he Bible does not emphasize looking for gifts; rather, it underscores the importance of becoming mature in Christ... When we [as leaders] stress what God stresses, we eliminate confusion and create unity in the Body of Jesus Christ.”³

² Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 176.

³ Gene A. Getz, *The Measure of a Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), p. 115.

Balancing love with truth, balancing gifts with maturity and balancing work with a total reliance upon Christ – these are difficult but necessary concepts for Christian leaders to struggle with if they are to ensure the overall health of their group. This requires the ability to think about system-wide ramifications of any decision, large or small. When you change the whole, every part is affected; when you change any part, the whole is affected.

Christ is Lord of the System

Effective leaders have discovered that tasks are best accomplished and goals best achieved by organizing and implementing systems. In doing so, we are really imitating God, who has a passion for order and harmony. Paul tells us in Colossians 1:15-20 that the whole of creation is a system that is ordered and sustained by Christ:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 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. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

This passage beautifully extols the sufficiency and supremacy of Jesus Christ and reveals his total dominion over the created order. He is both the Savior of all believers and the Creator of the cosmos. Notice that his creation extends from the heavens to the earth and includes both the visible and the invisible. The unseen hierarchy of angelic beings includes thrones, powers, rulers and authorities (see also Colossians 2:10, 15; Ephesians 6:12). John Milton in his *Paradise Lost* adopted a traditional sevenfold ranking of angels, archangels, principalities, powers, virtues,

dominions and thrones. While Scripture is not this specific, it certainly reveals that the angelic host is systematically ordered and ruled under the lordship of Christ.

Christ is “the head of the body, the church” (v. 18). This body metaphor portrays the church as an interconnected organism that works as an organized system of distinct and unique parts whose origin and unity is in Christ. Randall Harris and Rubel Shelly refer to the church as “the second incarnation.” In their book by that title, they state, “Just as the invisible God made himself visible and tangible in Jesus Christ, so the now-invisible Christ is making himself visible and tangible to the world through his church.”⁴

Christ not only rules all created things, but he also sustains them – “in him all things hold together” (v. 17). God loves order, and he designs intricate physical and spiritual systems that display his creativity and fulfill his purposes. Consider any plant or animal as a complex organism consisting of numerous interrelated systems. Then consider that these organisms themselves are parts of larger and highly-ordered ecological systems.

Or think of this: Light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. Since the sun is 93 million miles away from the earth, the light of the sun takes eight minutes to reach our planet. Yet, in comparison, light from the star Betelgeuse in the constellation Orion takes 520 years to reach us!⁵ On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg. The light that left Betelgeuse that day has not yet reached us, but it is on its way, hurtling through the universe at 186,000 miles per second. Bear in mind that the diameter of Betelgeuse is twice that of the earth’s orbit around the sun; in fact, the diameter is estimated to be about 400 million miles (it is in constant flux). Yet, this is only one star among about two

⁴ Randall J. Harris and Rubel Shelly, *The Second Incarnation* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1992), p. 48.

⁵ David Crystal, ed., *The Cambridge Fact Finder* (England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 3.

hundred billion others in our own Milky Way galaxy; the universe with over one hundred billion galaxies, is thought to be over 13 billion light-years in diameter.⁶

Christ created and sustains this entire system to this day. Nature points beyond itself to the mind of its Creator. As Greg Johnson says,

[W]hen we study God's world, we aren't just studying what God did ages ago at creation, we're hearing him speak to us right now. God is sovereign, and the universe continues to pulse with life by his sustaining power, not its own. To study the workings of the cosmos is to study the one making it work moment by moment. When you investigate how birds feed themselves, to use Jesus' example, you're really investigating how God is feeding the birds (Mt 6:26). When you examine the genetics behind the colors of lilies, you're really examining how God is dressing each flower (Mt 6:28-29). Science, like theology, is the study of what God is doing in creation.⁷

God is always thinking about the system he governs. As his stewards of this planet, we are called to develop that same skill. In fact, when God assigns Adam the task of naming the animals in Genesis 2:19-20, he is calling Adam to learn from the created world, to understand it. God establishes some of the basic categories for Adam's understanding ("Adam, these are animals"), but then he calls Adam to develop categories of his own ("Adam, what should we call that animal?"). If God is a systems thinker, in what ways can you, having been created in his image and likeness, develop this same skill?

The Vineyard as a System

God has designed organic systems in such a way that they transform sunlight, water and other nonliving substances into real living entities. These organic systems incorporate inanimate materials not only to sustain but also to reproduce themselves. Jesus uses a profound allegory about the vine and the fruit produced by its branches:

⁶ *The Encyclopedia Americana*, international ed., p. 582.

⁷ Greg Johnson, *The World According to God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 117.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

John 15:1-8

Jesus often used nature to illustrate spiritual truth, and the organic metaphor in this passage speaks of reproductive life. The vine, branches and fruit constitute an integrated biological system in which the fruit is the abundant product of life that is derived from the nutrients in the soil. As simplistic as it sounds, fruit grows on branches that are connected to a vine. Jesus makes it clear in his analogy that he is the vine; we are the branches. Our job is not to bear fruit. Our task is to remain, or abide, in him. He will see to it that the fruit is produced.

Just as the branch must receive its life from the vine, so believers must depend upon and look to the life of Christ within them to find their spiritual vitality. And just as the fruit nourishes others and contains within itself the seeds of its own reproduction, so the outward manifestation of the life of Christ in us nourishes and reproduces his life in others. If any part of the system malfunctions, the byproduct of fruit will fail to appear. When individuals function from a standpoint of self-promotion and self-protection, cooperation evaporates. Whether in a family, church or business, when team members are out of alignment, inefficiency rules.

One of the greatest temptations a leader faces is the belief that they can produce fruit without abiding. Jesus, however, makes it clear that when a branch abides, fruit is inevitable. When the branch does not abide, fruit is impossible. There's an old saying: "In every grape, the

history of the vine is told.” In other words, fruit doesn’t lie. If the vineyard is well-tended, the grape will be sweet. If the vineyard has been neglected or treated poorly, the fruit will be shriveled and sour. Fruit tells the truth about what’s going on in the system.

Systems involve leaders, groups and circumstances. In the case of this allegory, the leader is Jesus and the group consists of his followers. Disciples of Christ who are called into positions of leadership must first be submissive to the spiritual system described in this passage before they can hope to create organizational and relational systems that will have a lasting impact upon others. Calvin Miller has written,

[Leadership] is nurtured in the Spirit by following Jesus. Servant leaders generally are created not on commanding others but in obeying their Commander. In such a mystique, executive arrogance is not possible. The yielded leader is always an incarnation of Christ, the real leader of His church.⁸

Actions Affect the Entire System

Organizations often act in surprising and even seemingly strange ways. Distant events and decisions made by people in other companies – or countries – can have a powerful influence on our operation. Jonah made decisions that nearly cost the lives of people he did not personally know. He provides a powerful illustration of systems at work.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Ninevah and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

⁸ Calvin Miller, *The Empowered Leader* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), p. 17.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.”

Jonah 1:1-6

The sailors were fighting for their lives. The storm was threatening to sink their ship, and they were desperate “to find out who [was] responsible for this calamity” (v. 7). The responsibility lay with a man they had never previously met and with a decision which he had made before the journey had even begun. But he became a part of their system, and their lives were dramatically affected.

Then the sailors...cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”

This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

“Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried to the Lord, “O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased.” Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

Jonah 1:7-15

The Jonah story illustrates the need to think in terms of systems. The root causes of destructive problems may be impossible to pinpoint, or opportunities for expansion may be overlooked, if one fails to think in systems terms. Systems thinking opens our eyes to the fact that decisions we *don't* make will dramatically affect us, and decisions we *do* make will influence people we may never see. Leith Anderson writes,

The twenty-first century leader realizes that changing one important part of a ministry may require the involvement of the entire ministry. The support of all other leaders must be solicited. Seemingly distant and unrelated parts of the organization will have to do their part. Sacrifices will be required. Complexity and systems theory come together in all organizational changes. The leader is the manager of the process and the parts, determining what needs to be done and making sure that it is done.⁹

Jonah refused to carry God's message to Nineveh. He ran in the opposite direction. His decision to disobey God threatened the lives of these unsuspecting sailors. It's no news flash that leaders' decisions affect stakeholders. But a decision about a supplier, for instance, is rarely isolated to the supplier. Systems thinking reveals that seemingly isolated decisions reverberate to affect employees, customers, stockholders and people within the environment who may not even purchase the product or service. The leader who fails to think in systems terms will not – cannot – make wise decisions.

Systems Thinking and Problem Solving

In Nehemiah 2:1-9 we read about Nehemiah's unique ability to solve complex problems. His methods illustrate the two elements of systems thinking articulated by Peter Senge. As we understand these two elements, they'll help us better solve problems we face as leaders:

In the month of Nisan...the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city of Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it...."

It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct

⁹ Leith Anderson, *Leadership That Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1999), p. 66.

until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

Nehemiah used systems thinking to analyze complex problems. He was so successful in his work that, when people saw it, "they realized that this work had been done with the help of [their] God" (Nehemiah 6:16).

One of the most amazing things about Nehemiah's story is that nothing overtly miraculous took place. Certainly, God intervened, but nothing supernatural happened. No plagues or earthquakes, no parting of the seas or walls tumbling down. What we see in this story is hard work, good leadership and the hand of God.

Nehemiah's ability to *solve* complex problems grew out of his manner of *seeing* the problems – as a systems thinker. Peter Senge wrote, "Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots.'"¹⁰

Two elements of systems thinking made a difference for Nehemiah. He saw "the subtle interconnectedness that gives living systems their unique character," and he saw the "'structures' that underlie complex situations."¹¹ For a primer on systems thinking, read Nehemiah 1-6. You will see Senge's elements of systems thinking powerfully at work.

You'll discover that building the wall wasn't an easy project. It certainly wasn't problem-free. It's okay to have problems; it's not okay to ignore them. Problems are a fact of life for any system. How big those problems become will be determined by the leader's

¹⁰ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

willingness to address them. Things rarely work themselves out. The longer a problem goes unaddressed, the more complicated it becomes.

If God has birthed a vision in your heart, there is too much at stake to allow your system to become misaligned. Understand how this particular problem relates to the overall goals and objectives of the entire system. That's the key relationship – between the crisis and the vision of the whole system – that will prevent problems from becoming personal.

In resolving difficult problems, remember some of the things we've discussed in previous chapters. Lead without being manipulative or authoritarian; maintain your integrity at all costs; resolve differences in person; believe the best in others. Failure to do these things would contribute to discord in your business or family. And this discord could ultimately derail the entire system. Maintaining your moral authority allows you to confront problems when they surface among the system. Additionally, you will be a better leader, husband, wife, employer or whatever other role God has chosen for you at this time.