

Loneliness in Leadership: It's Cause and Cure

Jeremy Peckham

A recent survey of pastors conducted by the UK Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) found that a significant number of pastors feel isolated and under-supported in their ministry.

This survey is perhaps not surprising for those in business leadership who are familiar with the cliché that “it’s lonely at the top”. A survey of business leaders carried out in 2011 and reported in the Harvard Business Review provided some substance to the cliché finding that 50% of the respondents experienced feelings of loneliness. Significant in their survey is the fact that 61% felt that this impacted their performance in their role.¹

The fact that both Christian and non-Christian leaders experience this feeling of isolation and loneliness to a similar degree is interesting and demonstrates that these feelings are connected with the role of leadership regardless of whether that is in business or church. Given that the percentage that feel lonely is similar, whether they are pastors or business leaders, could it be that personality and leadership style might be a contributor to these feelings?

Why so lonely?

A clue to why so many leaders feel isolated and lonely is found in the FIEC survey, where half of those surveyed reported that “they didn’t have a friend in ministry who could help them to recharge their batteries”. Putting it in a business or organisational leadership context, leaders that feel isolated and lonely typically don’t have a mentor, coach, or peer with whom they can share and be honest.

A Stanford University Executive Coaching Survey carried out in 2013 found that two thirds of business leaders did not receive external leadership advice or coaching. My guess is that those pastors who feel lonely also don’t have a mentor or coach. I recall at one time the Head of Training in Africa Rural Trainers, our Kenyan based ministry that trains rural pastors, telling me the old African proverb “If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together”. There is a great deal of wisdom in this proverb and it reflects the truth of human nature that we are created for relationship. It also reminds us that those of us who are entrepreneurial leaders can often be in a hurry and can be in danger of pushing on alone trying to get to where we want to be. The truth is that we need others to journey with if we are to be effective as leaders and to reach the goals that we have set.

Wired for relationship

Social neuroscientists claim that the need for relatedness and safe human contact is hardwired in our brains. They suggest that relatedness is also closely related to trust, signalled by who we feel is in or out of our group.² These ideas should not surprise us as believers when we consider that our creator God is a relational God who before we were created was in perfect relationship in the Trinity. He created man for relationship with Him,

¹ It's Time to Acknowledge CEO Loneliness, Thomas J. Saporito, Harvard Business Review, February 15, 2012

² SCARF: A brain based model for collaborating with and influencing others. David Rock, NeuroLeadership Journal, Issue 1 2008.

a relationship originally with perfect trust, yet he also saw the importance of providing close human relationships.

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” Genesis 2:18

Whilst we can all give assent to the importance of relationships, some of us have a particular difficulty in applying it to our role in leadership. Indeed many will attest to the fact that they have friends and most leaders will have a spouse as a “helper”, but the problem lies in ensuring we have helpers with whom we share the burden of leadership.

Heroic leadership

Why do some find it so hard to find friends and mentors who can journey with them in leadership? I believe that the answer often lies in our style of leadership and our view of what leadership is. It is not untypical to find leaders who feel that they cannot share issues with their leadership team or that they should not share personal struggles and challenges. The reason for this stems from what I call “heroic leadership”, the idea that the leader has to be seen to be strong and bear the burden, have all the answers and not appear vulnerable.

We are all fallen creatures and no more so than leaders, so we need to ask ourselves whether it mightn't also be pride that holds us back and distorts our view of what leadership is.

Cultural nuances

Is our reluctance to seek feedback and honestly share with a mentor or peer entirely down to leadership style issues or might there also be cultural factors at play, even amongst Christians? There are various dimensions used to broadly characterize culture, one of which is individualism versus collectivism. Leaders in collective and shame cultures might be more reluctant to share weaknesses and sins with a mentor. In these cultures the wellbeing of the group is more important than the individual. The Japanese concept of *tatemae*, for example - which means that the true, honest self should be hidden behind public pretense, might influence the willingness of Japanese leaders to open up to a mentor.

In an article on Individualism, author Richard Koch says, “If there is one defining quality of the West, it is individualism.”³ For those of us in Western cultures our much prized individualism over more collective cultures may also contribute to isolationism in leadership and feed into this ‘heroic leader’ syndrome where we also feel that we can and should fix it ourselves. In a curious twist, researchers found that Westerners, though more individualistic and coming from a culture where honesty is generally valued, were more prepared to deceive in order to benefit themselves than a collective culture.

Yet various studies of Western business leaders have shown that the most effective leaders display integrity and honesty and seek feedback from others, suggesting that honesty with ourselves and others is perhaps linked to our willingness to seek feedback that helps in making us more effective. These ideas stack up with a Christian worldview where honesty is not optional and where we are encouraged to “speak the truth in love”.

³ <http://richardkoch.net/2013/10/is-individualism-good-or-bad/>

We are all living in changing cultures due a decay in traditional values and the rapid spread of ideas through mass communication, global business and the internet. Secularism is spreading apace and it does not share the idea of moral absolutes derived from our Creator.

In his book “Vanishing Truth”, philosopher David Nyberg writes “Deception, is an essential component of our ability to organize and shape the world, to resolve problems of coordination among individuals who differ, to cope with uncertainty and pain, to be civil and to achieve privacy as needed, to survive as species and to flourish as persons.”

Such views are not uncommon and are pervading many cultures. We must therefore be vigilant in ensuring that we are honest with ourselves and others and behave counter culturally not letting ourselves be “squeezed into the world’s mold”.

It’s in our style

Many leaders hide their vulnerability behind a mask of confidence and what can appear to be spiritual superiority, not necessarily knowingly but subconsciously as part of what they feel it means to be a leader. Yet the reality is that all of us have blind spots and lack self knowledge in areas of our life especially in areas that come to the fore in leadership such as leadership style. Good leaders understand their default style and learn to adjust appropriately to the situation rather than behaving as one pastor I know did in telling church members that “if you don’t like my leadership style you should leave”!

Uncover the blind spots

The authors of the aforementioned Stanford survey commented, “Even the best-of-the-best CEOs have their blind spots and can dramatically improve their performance with an outside perspective weighing in.” C S Lewis described these blind spots as our “fatal flaws”.⁴

If we are a more controlling type of person and leader then this accentuates the desire to be in control of how people perceive us and to hide our vulnerabilities behind a mask of confidence and spiritual maturity. This effectively creates a barrier between us and the very people that could help us by coming alongside to mentor and coach. Conversely, those that are more self assured and confident in their leadership often seek out mentors to provide input and feedback on their leadership, thus improving their own leadership and performance.

One study found that 82 percent of the business leaders surveyed reported that receiving mentoring led to improved leadership behaviours and ability to manage key relationships.⁵ From the Stanford survey, top of the list of issues that business leaders felt helped with from mentoring were:⁶

- sharing leadership and delegation
- conflict resolution
- team building

⁴ In the essay “The Trouble with ‘X’..” from God in the Dock, C S Lewis, Eerdmans, 1970

⁵ Lonely at the top: The Importance of Mentoring for Chairmen, CEOs and the C-suite , Suzanne de Janasz, PhD, Maury Peiperl, PhD, IMD, December 2013

⁶ Stanford Business, Executive Coaching Survey 2013

But shouldn't leadership be lonely?

Despite the evidence for leadership loneliness and its negative impact on organisations and the church I am surprised to find some endorsing loneliness! Lore Ferguson in an article titled "Leadership Is Lonely (and It Should Be)" states that "If you seek leadership, know that you're asking for a life of service and loneliness." Arguing from John the Baptist's statement in John 3:30 that, "He must increase, but I must decrease", she argues that "leadership is lonely because decreasing is lonely".⁷ Whilst I get her point, it can leave the impression that loneliness is to be embraced and is part of our growth in grace as a leader.

Jesus as role model

Does it have to be this way and is this a right view of what the Bible teaches about leadership? The account of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is instructive as we learn that Jesus openly displayed his own vulnerability as one fully human yet also the Son of God. He takes his three closest friends, Peter, James and John, with him to the garden and makes full disclosure to them:

"My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." Matt. 26:38

Going a little further Jesus prays to his Father, a prayer heard by these disciples and now recorded in the Gospels:

"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Matt. 26:39

Jesus is clearly not afraid to openly share his own personal struggles with his closest friends, also role modelling to those who would later become leaders in the church. Jesus perhaps felt humanly alone just as we can feel alone in leadership, but he doesn't keep this to himself; he wants to share it with his close friends and disciples. These friends were of course still on a journey of discovery and learning about discipleship and leadership, and they were unable to provide the support that Jesus sought and he rebukes them for not being able to "watch with me one hour". They were just ordinary men and rough around the edges, as we see demonstrated when James and John responded impulsively and angrily to the opposition Jesus received from the Samaritans recorded in Luke 9:54. Yet after the Resurrection and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, these three disciples, along with the others, developed into remarkable leaders. They had had a good mentor and role model!

Learn from the Master

If Jesus needed to share his burdens with his disciples and with his Father, how much more do we as merely human leaders? The model that Jesus gives us of leadership is one of shared leadership. This is a model endorsed by the appointing of elders in churches in the New Testament times and followed through into present day both in the church and in the boardrooms of Christian organisations and businesses. It is evidenced in the earliest days of God's choosing a people out of the nations and in the appointment of their leaders and advisors.

⁷ Ministry is lonely (and It Should Be), Lore Ferguson, The Gospel Coalition, March 24, 2014

One of the ways in which we can deal with loneliness and isolation is by building a leadership team, a team of advisors or a peer group. However, when we create a hierarchy of leadership, or speak of a “first amongst equals”, we must be aware of the danger of creating or building in to our leadership the isolation that we are trying to avoid. This can occur if we place ourselves above other leaders around us. For a pastor this can be hard because he is the full time paid “leader” in the church and unless there are other paid workers or leaders they will naturally feel alone. To be effective, leadership teams need to allow exposure of individual vulnerabilities and to foster constructive feedback and criticism, not necessarily as a group but at least one on one.

Find a mentor or peer

Many Christian leaders share this view yet still feel alone and isolated. The lesson that we need to learn is that our own style of leadership can thwart the proper functioning of a leadership team and also keep us from being willing to find an individual mentor. In most cases a leader will also benefit from a personal mentor or even a small number of mentors with different experiences. To what extent are we using our spouse as a mentor? They can be a sounding board and surely know us best so they can provide feedback and criticism in a context of love and unreserved commitment.

Circumstances may still require a peer and an experienced mentor to journey with us. Some will argue that they don't have time to find a mentor outside the fellowship or organisation, or that they are not networked well enough to find someone. For others, the problem lies in an unwillingness to seek counsel and mentoring from among their own leadership or a mature believer in the fellowship or organisation. Of course small churches and organisations will have a limited pool of people to draw on and it may not be possible to find a mentor from within. In larger churches and organisations help may be close at hand but an “heroic leadership” view of leadership coupled with a more controlling leadership style keeps it at bay.

Let God's word illuminate dark corners

Vital and important though the need for shared leadership and a personal mentor is, it is imperative that we are seeking to draw ever closer to God through daily meditation, prayer and Bible reading. God's word is a lamp that can shine deep into the recesses of our heart and reveal our weaknesses and blind spots, enabling us to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

As God's word speaks to us and we allow it to reveal weaknesses and sins we are more open to lovingly critical input from a peer or mentor. In his letter to the Jewish Christians, James exhorts them to confess their sins to one another.

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”
James 5:16

This passage is set in the context of Christians being urged to summon elders to pray for them if they are sick. Many commentators believe that the construction of the original text allows for v16 in this passage to be viewed as a broader encouragement to the saints to confess their sins to one another, whether or not they may be physically ill, that they may be healed of illness or weakness. In the 18 Century, Wesley encouraged the application of this text to small group meetings. In a mentoring context, if it is to help us to grow and

mature in our faith and leadership, then there will inevitably be an honest disclosure of failings and sins. This process has the benefit of holding us more accountable to our mentor or peer as we meet regularly and share progress.

If we are to develop and become more effective as leaders, then we must combat the problem of isolation, loneliness and lack of friends. This brings us full circle to examining our style of leadership and being honest with ourselves, realising that we may be our own worst enemy. A wise mentor will be able to help us understand our leadership style better, to see our blind spots, and help us to overcome these deficiencies and become more effective as we seek God's help. Some of us who are more controlling or are "heroic" leaders will need to humble ourselves to seek out and accept the mentoring and honest accountability that we surely need. Pastors and leaders of organisations, do you have a mentor? If not, why not?