

# LEAD ON

## DOING LIFE WITH THOSE ON THE TEAM

BY LUKE BRIGGS

'I've got no time for low-capacity people on my team'. It was a flippant, half-joking comment in a non-public setting but, as this leader's words sunk in, I couldn't help but find them ironic.

Who would Jesus hire?

Apparently, all the people we wouldn't – terrorists, tax collectors, unschooled tradesmen and so on. That's a whole other article, but the comment came back to me in contemplating how we do life with those we share leadership with.

When we're more concerned with what we get out of people than we are with them as people, we slip into what Martin Buber famously called 'I-it' relationships rather than 'I-thou'. People become cogs in a machine, and that's a problem, even if the machine makes good things (like growing churches or life-changing charities).

I wonder if one of the antidotes to this is actually pretty simple. Doing life with the people we lead.



### A RELATIONAL CULTURE

There's a sliding scale of what that looks like. The first church I worked for was a plant on a small estate. Geographical proximity was inbuilt. I lived with the vicar and his family. Life together was automatic.

In other contexts, really being friends with the people who work for me has been a great joy. I used to line manage a guy I could happily have over to watch football. We were colleagues, but also mates. I don't work for the church I'm currently part of. Sometimes I meet with the vicar for him to supervise areas I serve in; other times we might go for a walk or a pint and chat theology or family. I don't do life with him daily, but I do feel like he's my friend as well as my leader.

As I've gone on in leadership, though, I've been surprised to learn that some leaders don't do this. They maintain a professional culture, not a relational one. Everything is task-based and all that seems to matter is output.

While I understand that some of us are more task-orientated than others, I'd argue that this makes a person-centred approach even more important, precisely because of the danger that we might unwittingly dehumanise people in the pursuit of efficient effectiveness. Besides that, doing life with those we lead just feels... well, Jesus-like.

For one thing, loving our neighbours is quite high on the priority list. It's literally one of the two things Jesus said was most important. Who counts as a neighbour if not the very people who work or serve with/under us?

### DOING LIFE AT 3MPH

Then there's also a litany of more specific little examples from Jesus' leadership.

For three years his closest co-workers travel around on foot, doing life together at about 3mph. The gospels read like every moment was a discipleship opportunity. Thousands of hungry people? 'You give them something to eat' (Matthew 14:6). Crossing a lake and forgotten to bring bread? 'Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees' (Matthew 16:6) Walking through a rough part of town? Good time to ask 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' (Matthew 16:13). 'Who do you say I am?' (Matthew 16:15).

That's to say nothing of the sheer amount of eating together that seems to go on. New Testament scholar, Robert Karns, notes that, particularly in Luke's gospel, 'Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal' and those he led were often part of them. He also had an inner circle of really close friends – a three within the twelve. John refers to himself as 'the disciple Jesus loved'. Jesus uses the word 'friends' of his team. Once you start looking, it's hard to stop finding this in Jesus' leadership.

This doesn't mean we should try to artificially be best friends with everyone. That's not normal, natural or possible, and forced friendship carries a cringe factor. There are some people on my current Chaplaincy team whom I don't hang out with outside work, and that's okay. We're all closer to some people than others; even Jesus seems to have been. But there's much to be said for modelling and developing a relational culture as well as a professional one. They're not in opposition, or at least they needn't be, and it might not be that difficult to do.

Some of the 'little wins' I've noticed in good leaders around me include things like starting a line management meeting by asking the employee about their weekend before they get to the task-based conversation or stopping to eat lunch with others rather than munching away in front of a laptop. That might cost 20 minutes of productivity per day, but it's good for people. Leadership is about people.



Arguably, this all leads to greater productivity anyway. It's true that sometimes teams can work well without relational cohesion, but in every sphere, from sport to business, experts recognise that morale impacts performance. It's not for no reason that companies increasingly emphasise team-based treats and rewards in their job adverts.

The net result of doing life with those we're leading might be a stronger sense of team, a greater degree of trust and loyalty, and a better overall output... But is that even the end goal? I'd argue yes, and no – perhaps it's the bonus by-product.

Regardless of results, doing life with those we're leading just seems to me a more Christ like way to be. For that reason, some of my favourite ministry moments have been times when nothing was being 'achieved', like the day I went to London to watch live sport with the mate who happens to be my current administrator and at no point felt like I was his boss. Or the time one of the Chaplains on my theologically diverse, ecumenical team felt comfortable sharing a personal struggle in a meeting and we paused while each person prayed out loud for her in turn, unprompted. We didn't get much done in that moment, but it did feel like the kingdom of God.

There is much that more naturally relational leaders can learn from those who lean more towards a task-centred culture. There's plenty to be said for maxims and techniques that enhance efficiency and effectiveness. But if the most important thing is to love God and love one's neighbour, perhaps doing life with those we lead is not only the means to enhanced output in a team on mission. Maybe it's the mission itself.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- If one end of a scale was 'Getting the most and best out of everyone no matter what' and the other end was 'Derailing team productivity; raising team morale', where would you place yourself?
- To what extent do you do life with those you lead? In what other ways could you?
- How much is the motivation for doing life together driven by the goal of greater productivity? What might it look like to make that more person-centred and less goal-orientated?

