

KNOWING YOURSELF AS A LEADER

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'This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.'

So says Shakespeare's Polonius in Hamlet, as parting advice to his son Laertes as he sets off on a voyage.

While Shakespeare's words aren't quite holy writ, they do nonetheless contain much wisdom. But how can we be true to ourselves if we do not know who we are, if we are lacking in self-knowledge?

I've always found it fascinating that Calvin starts his Institutes with these words: 'Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.' If Calvin is right then our ability to know God – or otherwise – is tied up with our ability to know ourselves.

KNOWING OURSELVES MATTERS

So knowing ourselves matters. And knowing ourselves as leaders matters. What follows here is a fairly confessional piece on my part that explains how I have come to know myself as a leader. If it helps you in your journey of self-knowledge as a leader then I'll be delighted.

My earliest conscious experience of being a leader was being made a 'sixer' in the Cubs. I had people who were answerable to me (at least for a couple of hours on Monday night) and I enjoyed leading them. Many years

later I was asked at very short notice to take over leading a team of people on a beach mission, which I did, and thus had my first taste of explicitly Christian leadership. And I flourished in it.

But not all in my garden was rosy. I grew late, physically, so always saw myself as 'small'. I have an older brother to whom I'm very close but I think we'd both agree he's quite strong-willed! So 'small younger brother' was a fairly deep-seated defining self-image I had of myself.

That perception was significantly and positively disturbed when in my early twenties I acted in a cycle of medieval mystery plays. I played Joseph, betrothed to Mary. I well remember the director getting quite impatient with me and insisting that I should play him 'as a big burly Yorkshireman' – which I did my best to



do. But the thought that anyone should consider that I could convincingly pretend to be a big burly Yorkshireman was a revelation to me.

Years passed. I spent a short spell as a teacher before being ordained in my late twenties, and took on my first incumbency four years later. I remember asking a good friend who was also in ministry whether I was enough of a leader to be a vicar in my own right. He said he thought I certainly was. But did I believe it?

One of the problems I faced, as well as my own 'small' self-image, was the models of leadership I saw around me. By and large these were fairly 'tough', macho even: not models to which I could aspire, or ones to which, to be honest, I wanted to aspire.

Then one day I was having some psychometric tests explained to me. This particular set recorded four variables, two of which were 'influence' and 'dominance'. That these two could be differentiated came to me as little short of a revelation. Up to then I'd assumed that to be influential you had to be dominant. But the tests told a different story. You could certainly be influential without being overbearing. Indeed when I did the test myself I came out as highly influential, and scored around the average for dominance (and not as low as I'd expected). I remember thinking, 'Well how much better to be highly influential, with low dominance, than highly dominant but un-influential.' Indeed we have a word for people who are very dominant but exercise little real influence: we call them dictators.

For me that was a very liberating experience, giving me permission to be myself rather than conforming to the pattern of others.

I learnt something else significant: the growing realisation that people enjoyed being led by me. That was my experience in the church I led. It was also my experience in leading a Pathfinder Venture team during my time at CPAS. People began telling me they enjoyed my leadership. Indeed I'd go so far as to say that people loved being led by me, and loved me as their leader. Even as I write those words I realise there's great risk in saying them. Such things can be over-flattering to

the ego, but I believe it to be true and I try to say it with due humility.

CLARIFYING CALL

All these various experiences came together in a moment of crystallisation when someone asked me what I thought God's call on my life was. Almost without thinking the words tumbled out: 'I believe I'm called to be a builder of Christian community; I believe I'm called to preach and teach in the context of Christian community; and I believe I'm called to exercise leadership in the Christian community that allows others to blossom and flourish.'

Having said it, I had to write it down quickly so as not to lose it. It was another moment of revelation for me, and I know now that whatever else I do in life I need to be true to that calling, for that is the leader I am.

It was a long journey to get to that point, and not without its pain. But I'm so grateful to God who has taken me down that road. And I'm very grateful to the people who have been willing to be led by me, and who have encouraged me in my leadership.

Scripture doesn't give us a monochrome picture of leadership. In talking about leadership gifts in Ephesians 4 Paul says that grace has been given to us 'as Christ apportioned it' (4:7) – the implication being that we've not all been given it in the same way. 1 Peter 4:10 talks of the 'various forms' God's grace takes. Literally, Peter talks about God's 'variegated', or even 'multicoloured', grace. And grace is multicoloured, never monochrome.

May God help you to know just how grace has been, uniquely, apportioned to you as a leader. And may we all have the grace to let one another be the unique leaders the Lord has called us to be.

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FOR REFLECTION

1. What was your earliest leadership experience? What did you learn from it?
2. Looking at other leaders you have known who has influenced you most? And least?
3. If you were asked to describe your calling as a leader how would you articulate it?
4. Are you at ease with yourself as a leader? If not, why not? If so – thank God!