

## LEADERSHIP PHASES

BY IAN PARKINSON

It was a conversation with a friend, around how long I might continue in the church I had led for more than a decade, which got me thinking. 'I've led this church through four or five different phases,' I suggested. 'I'm not sure that I've got energy for another phase.' 'No,' said my friend, also pondering his own leadership future. 'I guess we only have so many phases within us.'

Reflecting further upon the experience of twenty-five years spent leading two different local churches, I began to realise that my time in each place could be broken down into a series of distinct phases or stages. The different stages formed a kind of progression and I realised that fruitfulness in each of them depended upon having led effectively through the previous stage.



Moreover, it occurred to me that leadership in each stage looked a little different from that in others and required the leader to deploy themselves differently according to the specific stage being experienced.

All of this might seem completely obvious to some reading this article. However, for the sake of those like me who were oblivious to such insights prior to stumbling upon them, and for whom leadership is assumed to be one long continuum, let me suggest that recognising the different stages of a leadership journey might be one of the more beneficial things we might do for the sake of our fruitfulness and effectiveness.

There are sound organisational reasons for breaking down leadership into phases of 3-5 years. Studies of organisational health suggest that failure to review, every few years, the health and effectiveness, activities and initiatives of any organisation, including a local church, inevitably leads to decline and loss of momentum. However, there are other compelling reasons for doing so.

Recognising the phase we are in, in terms of our leadership relationship with our church, enables us to discern:

- What kind of leadership others require from us at this particular moment.
- What our leadership focus needs to be.
- What leadership style might be most helpful.

Furthermore an understanding of these different phases is profoundly useful in terms of helping us

determine how long to stay in role and whether or not the church is in a place where we might be able to move on without prejudicing the health of its mission and ministry.

One of the disappointments I hear reported by numbers of leaders is to do with failure to get buy-in to cherished initiatives and innovations. In many cases this appears to be due to a misreading of the current leadership phase and a neglect of some of the more foundational behaviours required in order to enable to secure commitment to such initiatives.

Before we examine the different phases in a leadership journey, it should be pointed out that there will always be a level of overlap between these phases, that the different eras they represent are not completely demarcated, and that transitions between them may be gradual rather than abrupt. I identify four distinct phases as follows.

### 1. FOUNDATIONAL

No matter what the situation we inherit upon taking on a new post, the first phase of our leadership will inevitably be one of laying good foundations for what is to come. At the heart of this will be the business of gaining the trust of those whom you are called to lead and winning their confidence.

Where there has been disappointment with previous leadership or where trust has broken down, this may be a more complex and lengthy process. In my first church I spent the first few weeks of my tenure visiting as many of the church members as possible in their homes, listening to their own experiences of and hopes for our church, and giving them opportunity to get to know me and something of my own heart. Given the recent pain to do with experience of leaders in that church and the high turnover of vicars in its recent past, the foundational phase took much longer than in my next church which, despite being somewhat tired and dispirited after a long vacancy, nevertheless had a much greater sense of health and integrity.

In the foundational phase, the leader will pay great attention to enabling the church establish or refresh its self-understanding in terms of identity, purpose and values, and will avoid the temptation to rush headlong into new initiatives until these fundamental questions are addressed.

In the foundational phase, attention will be paid to identifying others with whom leadership might be shared and ensuring that, as far as possible, these are the people who occupy leadership positions. Enabling unsuitable people to resign with grace may also be a key priority in this phase!

In this phase, the leader will often deploy a mix of affiliative and pace-setting leadership styles, working hard to establish values and modelling very intentionally the behaviours and dispositions which we long to see proliferate more widely.



### 2. DEVELOPMENTAL

Having won trust and established purpose and values, the leader now needs to focus on being a catalyst for new initiatives. In this phase the emphasis will be on enabling the church to discern God's direction for us, on the forming and communication of vision for mission and ministry, and on the development of appropriate strategies in order to turn such vision into action. This may well be a time in which structures are re-examined in the light of our agreed vision and revised if not entirely suitable.

In this phase the leader needs to deploy a visionary style and to see their role as significantly to do with releasing the missional imagination of all God's people.

### 3. CONSOLIDATION

This is a vital phase if the achievements of the previous phase are to be sustained. Whilst innovation may continue, and may well now be at the initiative of other people than the senior leader, one of the primary responsibilities of that leader is to ensure that new developments are normalised.

One of the greatest challenges to this taking place are to do with resources. In this phase the leader may well focus on growing and developing others in ministry and leadership and growing the capacity of individuals and of the whole church. Hopefully this work has not been entirely neglected along the way, but this might be the time to be more intentional. For example, it was in this phase that I undertook to start a formal Leadership Training programme and to spend more time supervising those with key ministry responsibilities in the church.

In this phase the leader will need to deploy a coaching leadership style.

The consolidation phase may be followed by a further cycle of development and consolidation, but may lead to a final stage.

### 4. EXPANSION

This phase is all about the growth of things beyond one's immediate control or direct influence, and about cultivating a sense of adventure within the hearts of people. This might



involve, for example, planting a church or new missional community, or releasing people to launch a major community or social action project. It should involve planning for one's own succession, either through a process of handing over responsibility to a successor or, more likely, ensuring that people and processes are in place to ensure the health and vitality of the church beyond your own leadership.

In this phase the leader will seek to deploy democratic and coaching styles.

The further I travel along the leadership road, the more convinced I become that good leadership is both intentional and reflective. Recognising the phase in which we find ourselves in our leadership and deploying ourselves in a manner appropriate for that phase will enhance our effectiveness and may well keep us from unnecessary frustration and disappointment.



?

**AS YOU REFLECT ON YOUR OWN LEADERSHIP JOURNEY IN YOUR CURRENT POST:**

- How easy is it to discern different stages this journey has taken? How would you describe the phase you are currently in?
- How appropriate to the requirements of this current stage is your own deployment of yourself as a leader? Are there ways in which you might need to adjust your leadership style in order to meet the demands of this particular stage?
- How intentional are you about growing resources through developing other people? What further steps could you take in order to do this more effectively?