

MAINTAINING FOCUS

BY IAN PARKINSON

One of my all-time leadership heroes is Nehemiah, the 5th century BC governor of Jerusalem under whose leadership the ruined wall of that city was rebuilt. Perhaps it is because I 'happened' to be reading the book which bears his name in the week in which I was offered my first senior leadership post, itself a call to a work involving significant spiritual rebuilding and the galvanising into action of a local church whose people had experienced great disappointment. He became to me a leadership coach, role model, and huge encouragement and inspiration at a critical time in my own life.

His ministry was striking for a number of reasons. Most noteworthy is his achievement of securing the completion of an immense building project in the astonishingly short space of 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15). This is doubly remarkable given the level of disillusionment and disappointment which, prior to Nehemiah's arrival in the city, existed amongst those inhabitants of Jerusalem who ultimately became his workforce. God used Nehemiah to galvanise these people through the communication of a compelling vision, to reassure them when their confidence was flagging, to help them press on when faced with opposition and threats, and to find new hope in God and in his unchanging kingdom purposes.

All of us are involved in similar work to a greater or lesser extent. Some of us will unashamedly be involved in the work of rebuilding the capacity of a local church to engage in the ministry of the kingdom, repairing that which has become broken down or neglected, restoring confidence in God and in his mission.

Others of us will be building further on an existing foundation, seeking to respond to God's leading as we develop new missional initiatives in our various contexts. All of us will face similar challenges to those which Nehemiah faced. All of us will need to encourage

others, deal with opposition, overcome our own tendencies to lose our nerve, become distracted or be overwhelmed by exhaustion. Our effectiveness in all this probably depends upon our capacity to master one of the key leadership attributes which Nehemiah models to us, that of maintaining our focus.

I guess that I am not alone in recognising how easy it is to allow focus to drift, to allow myself to become distracted from the pursuit of those tasks which should be my top priority and which will have maximum impact in terms of the advance of the kingdom.

Sometimes this happens because we succumb to the tyranny of the urgent, sometimes because we give in to pressures exerted upon us by the opinions of others and a desire for a quiet life. Sometimes it is because we find it harder to persevere with projects which produce few, if any, short term gains, but which, if sustained will produce significant long-term fruit – this, I am convinced, is why, for example, there seems to be a widespread preference amongst many leaders for expending energy in doing ministry at the expense of allocating time in investing in and growing others for ministry. Sometimes it is simply because we either lose heart ourselves, or lose sight of the urgency of the tasks entrusted to us. Not so Nehemiah.

One of the most striking verses in the whole of his book details his response to some heavyweight opponents who were doing all in their power to draw him away from the work of rebuilding. 'I am doing a great work and I cannot come down to meet you,' (Nehemiah 6:3) is his response to their overtures. What was his secret?

The roots of Nehemiah's determined focus on seeing his task accomplished come to light in the first chapter of his book and are born out of a deep level of encounter with God. Here is a man who walks closely with the God to whom he is bound by covenant. Here is a man who is consumed with a passion for God's kingdom and whose instinct is to seek God's presence at every turn. It is this habit of cultivating closeness to God which leads to a clarity about God's purposes and priorities and a compulsion to pursue them above all else. Rebuilding matters to Nehemiah because it matters to God.

Focus comes from experiencing a sense of divine compulsion. Stephen Covey suggests that the greatest incentive to saying 'no' is having an even greater 'yes' burning within you. Discerning, and allowing ourselves to be owned by those things which truly matter to God, letting them burn within us, is, in my experience, the key to staying focused. Whilst we may be relatively easily convinced intellectually or theoretically of the importance or value of certain practices or pursuits, that in itself is often not enough to keep us on task. Our hearts have to be equally persuaded. The steps we might take in order to keep our hearts burning are fairly obvious but worth restating:

1. PRIORITISE OUR OWN PERSONAL TIME WITH GOD

A church leader friend of mine has recently seen his workload and levels of responsibility rise very significantly. I asked him, 'How are you managing to prevent the large increase, both in volume of work and of people's expectations, from causing your focus to diminish?' 'By making sure that I give the first hour of every day to the Lord,' was his answer. Cultivating our closeness to God sharpens our focus.

2. TAKE TIME OUT TO REFLECT AND RECALIBRATE

Getting some distance from time to time from the coalface, reviewing, with God, our use of time and resources and effecting necessary changes is one of the most valuable things we might do. An annual retreat, the occasional quiet day are all useful ways of achieving this; they need to be diaried in well in advance and even if we think we don't really need them - we will! Many of my most significant moments of recalibration have come during the weeks I have spent each summer at a Christian festival. It hasn't necessarily been any specific teaching which has been the catalyst for this, but rather the experience of being immersed consciously in the presence of God.

3. BE ACCOUNTABLE

An accountability partner or group who will ask hard questions of us and encourage us as we seek to hold fast to agreed priorities, and who will keep us pointing towards God, may well be one of the most helpful adjuncts to maintaining focus.

Stephen Cotterell suggests that

'The leader is the one who recalls the organisation to its primary vocation... and dares the whole organisation to stop for a minute and take time out to remember why they are there.'

The key to keeping those whom we lead focused is by maintaining our own focus.



FOR REFLECTION

1. What are the greatest threats I face to maintaining my focus on God's priorities for me and my leadership?
2. What have been the most helpful practices for me in the past in terms of preserving focus?
3. Who are the people who might be my best resource for avoiding distraction and pressing on with God's priorities for me?