LEADERSHIP AS RELATIONSHIP
Finding Meaning, Significance, Community, Direction and Excitement
David S Penner, PhD, Director of the doctoral leadership programme, Loma Linda University (dspenner@llu.edu)

Recently, in a seminar I was conducting, I asked a group of employees from several departments what they wanted from their job. Apart from the salary, what was important about their work? What made them get up in the morning and do their best? In other words, why do they work? From their list, several interesting themes emerge. In their words, they wanted to:

1. Be part of something important, something larger than their individual departments
2. Feel a sense of direction, purpose and accomplishment
3. Be part of a community, to have a sense of belonging, security and fellowship
4. Be part of a successful team, to assist others in accomplishing tasks
5. Be given interesting and challenging work with opportunities to learn a variety of tasks
6. Be needed, valued, recognized and appreciated
7. Make a positive difference in the lives of those they encountered in the workplace, in the community and in the larger world
8. Serve, to help, and to be of service to others
9. Feel a sense of excitement, to be motivated, inspired and to feel passion in their work

For those in leadership positions, this is very good news. Rather than demanding the impossible, they are asking for a relationship. This is not a top-down, power-and-control relationship where energy is focused on compliance, blindly following orders, 'watching our back' or 'covering our tail'. The emphasis here is in finding meaning, significance and purpose – a goal everyone can get excited about.

Researchers at London Business School, Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones turned the question of leadership around and asked, What do followers want? Like the group above, they found that followers wanted:

- **Community** (followers long for a sense of belonging, to feel part of something bigger)
- **Authenticity** (followers choose to be led by humans not titles or credentials)
- **Significance** (followers want to believe their efforts matter)
- **Excitement** (followers need a spark to trigger their exceptional performance)

Compare this list with a quick review from leadership literature on what great leaders do. John Kotter identifies the leadership task as 'setting direction', 'aligning people', 'motivating and inspiring'. Peter Block says the central task is to build community by 'inviting conversation', 'creating hospitable space' and 'cultivating belonging'. John Ryan finds that besides managing change, the three most important tasks of leadership are directing and motivating people; 'translating vision into
realistic strategies’; and ‘inspiring commitment by recognizing and rewarding employee achievements’. Best-selling authors David and Wendy Ulrich in their book, *The Why of Work*, add that leadership is all about ‘making meaning in the workplace’, ‘creating value’, and ‘building hope for the future’.

When the two lists are compared, we discover they are amazingly similar. There are many points on which followers and leaders agree. The common ground falls into five interesting categories – *meaning, significance, community, direction* and *excitement*. Remembering that leadership is relationship and that relationship is two-way, these tasks become mutual responsibilities common to everyone in the organisation.

Again, for leaders this is good news. We are not alone. We do not need to move outside of our authentic selves to perform these tasks. As Goffee and Jones observe, followers want us to be ourselves, not someone else or to take on a special work *persona*. When we live outside of our authentic self, we become artificial, conversations become awkward or painful, and our very presence casts a shadow across the organization. But in this model of leadership as relationship, we are simply asked to bring our strengths and values to the task and to work together.

There are, however, additional tasks for those appointed to positions of leadership. It is our responsibility to initiate the relationship, invite the community together, set the agenda, encourage communication and to reflect back the intelligence of the group. We model other practices we want to see – generous praise for others, recognition of accomplishments and timely, open and personalized feedback. We can further help create meaning by celebrating achievements, sharing stories of the past and future, and in organizing opportunities for everyone to connect with one another.

The employees spoke authentically when they answered my question – what do you want from your job? Research on leadership underscores these ideas. Our goal is for everyone to be able to say: “I am part of a mission that is big, important and valuable. My efforts really matter. I am recognized and appreciated. I belong. I am hopeful and confident – we are going somewhere. This is a great place to work; I am performing at my best!”

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Dear Friends

During recent meetings I had cause to reflect on “The GC policy on R&R”. Wow! I first became aware of R&R over a working meal in a Tirana restaurant during the Kosovo war. A couple of ADRA veterans showed up, resolved themselves into a committee and promptly voted themselves a Rest & Recuperation package before they had lifted a finger. Risibly rich thought I, before tucking into the Rum & Raisin.

On reflection there are several R&R’s of recent reckoning:

1) The controversy between Right & Wrong
2) Reconciling Revelation & Reason
3) Balancing Rights & Responsibility
4) Reading Religion without Writing & Arithmetical
5) Righteousness & Results
6) Repentance, Reconciliation & Rebirth

Even a seventh: “Revival & Reformation”! As a couplet I understand this to mean a renewed concentration on the spiritual disciplines of prayer, bible study and piety, with a view to some form of religious activism. But, to what end?

We consider a plant to have revived when it recovers from drought, or a person is revived when they regain vitality after an illness. So what does revival really mean?

The root of ‘revival’ is associated with the Latin *vivi*’ as in vivid, I discover. Thus, *revival is about seeing more clearly, with a greater richness of colour and contrast.* If this is the object of the great disciplines, then I have every reason to engage.

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Here is a test to apply these five points. Following the five statements are some follow-up questions. Can you say this about your job? Can your followers say this about theirs?

- **Meaning** – “I am part of a mission that is big, important and valuable.”
  - Can I explain how I fit into a plan that is greater than myself? Can I explain why are we doing this (in terms of a specific task, the organization, or the larger society)?

- **Significance** – “My efforts really matter.”
  - Do I know the value of what I do? Do I know how my job is important for the moment but also to the larger narrative?

- **Community** – “I am recognized and appreciated. I belong.”
  - Do I know how am I connected to others, to leadership and to the organization? Does my work take place in a hospitable space where I have adequate social interaction and can engage in conversations that matter? Are my contributions wanted, needed and appreciated?

- **Direction** – “I am hopeful and confident – we are going somewhere.”
  - Do I know how what I am doing is part of the unfolding story? Do I know the future value of today’s work?

- **Excitement** – “This is a great place to work; I am performing at my best!”
  - Am I going to be encouraged or diminished by my work today? Am I am doing great work, my best, and am energized to do more than expected?
A different approach is found in the classic little book by Roger Allen. This clever business primer uses the characters in A. A. Milne's classic children's story to illustrate fundamental principles of good management. Here are some interesting, simple principles exposed.

There are six fundamental functions of a boss—even Adventist leaders are faced with these tasks:

1. Determine goals and the way to get there
2. Organise what resources are needed, tasks that need to be performed, and who is most suitable for the job
3. Motivate (inspire, empower) others
4. Develop people
5. Communicate what is going on
6. Measure and analyse: (a) how you approach the goal, and (b) how the workers function, and take actions to improve performance

Due to limitations of space, I restrict myself to some observations on Goals, Motivation, and Communication.

**Goals:** When you formulate goals, follow the rules that say how meaningful and appropriate goals should be worded. The goals must derive from, and agree with, the purpose and identity of the organisation (church) you lead. Why does the organisation (the church) exist? Clarifying the purpose requires much deep thinking and hard work. Very often, we assume that it is self-evident. But it isn't. When you lose the purpose, you lose your leadership. There is an example of this from an American rail-road company in the USA. They defined their purpose as "running trains" - but in reality the purpose was to transport people and goods from one place to another. They confused the means—the trains—with the purpose—the transportations. And the result was that they went bankrupt as the technical development progressed and other companies with the right understanding of their purpose bypassed them.

For Seventh-day Adventist church leaders this is a vital lesson. Why does the church exist? Maybe you are wasting a lot of time and energy on dealing with futile things that come to you because you have defined the purpose of the church poorly? If you say that the purpose of the church is to win new members, that purpose will govern your agenda, how you use resources, and how you evaluate success. If you say that the purpose of the church is to provide a spiritual community where God is present (and to this open community people are being invited), your agenda changes, you use your resources differently, and you evaluate success differently. If you feel uncertain about the purpose, the world-wide Adventist Church has both mission and value statements that may provide guidance. In our Tell-the World Plan, these definitions are also found. Why not ask yourself why the local church exists? Why the conference exist? Why the union exists? You may find a new self-understanding and your will be able to prioritise and focus on the right things.

A second aspect of goals is that you must be able to transform them into a certain work. I have seen many goal documents that got lost in theological ideas and became like a sermon, but it was impossible to say at the end what we were to do. All goals must have a practical component that can be transformed into work that you can do. Otherwise, the goal is a theory and nothing else.

Finally, Winnie the Pooh discovers that goals must be directed towards something essential. What is essential to the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Is it our results in terms of size, membership, buildings, or tithe? Or is it our faithfulness in doing our work for God to the best of our ability? I have argued elsewhere that it is a distinct Seventh-day Adventist tenet that it is our faithfulness that matters (B. Wiklander, “The Mission of God and the Faithfulness of His People: An Exegetical reading of Revelation 14:6-13”, in Exploring the Frontiers of Faith, Festschrift in Honour of Jan Paulsen, Advent-Verlag, Lueneburg, Germany, 2009, pp. 277-298).

**Motivation:** In motivating people, you may apply the x-theory or the y-theory: The x-theory assumes that people are lazy and useless, that they work only if they have nothing else to do, that they resist work and only work when being forced to. This assumes that people cannot take responsibility for themselves and their actions and must be supervised and controlled. Although there may be situations when this applies, the danger is that you develop an authoritarian leadership style.

The y-theory assumes that people have a need to work and that they want to be active and take responsibility. They don't want another person to take care of them, because they want to manage on their own. This is what leads to a consultative leadership style, where you engage your workers in your decision-making. The danger is that you forget your ultimate responsibility as leader and defer to the group decisions that should be yours. Your leadership may swing from one end to the other, depending on who you are talking to.

Allen concludes that each leader must determine what is the right approach in each situation. This may not be easy, but it helps to remember that one of these two opposite views will apply.

**Communication:** A leader needs to understand what communication is and what it is not:

- Communicating is to exchange information. It means that you need to listen as well as to speak.
- All information needs to be as meaningful as possible to the person who is the intended receiver. You say what you say in a way that the receiver, not the sender (you), can understand and accept.
- Check often that the message has been understood. Don’t assume that it has. You would be surprised at how often what you say or write is ignored or misunderstood.
- Your information can be transmitted in many different ways, but the more ways you use, the clearer the information will be. However, although you use different methods and channels, the message needs to be the same, because a leader must be consistent; otherwise he/she will not be believed. And remember that your actions speak sometimes more than words.

I trust that these few highlights has whetted your appetite for reading this little charming book. It is a classic and I found several offers of various editions of the book on the Internet. Enjoy the reading and share it with your teams!
TO THINK ABOUT…
FIRE UP YOUR LEADERSHIP WITH VISION

Every promise of God proves true; he protects everyone who runs to him for help. Proverbs 30,5. (The Message)

Where does a leader’s vision come from? To find your vision, you must listen to...

The Inner Voice: Vision starts within. Do you know what your life’s mission is? If what you’re pursuing in life doesn’t come from the depths of who you are and what you believe, you will not be able to accomplish it.

The Unhappy Voice: Where does inspiration for great ideas come from? From noticing what doesn’t work. Discontent with the status quo is a great catalyst for vision. No great leader in history has fought to prevent change.

The Successful Voice: Nobody can accomplish great things alone. If you want to lead others to greatness, find a good mentor, an advisor who can help you sharpen your vision.

The Higher Voice: Don’t let your vision be confined by your own limited capabilities. A truly valuable vision must have God in it. Only He knows what you’re really capable of. Have you looked beyond yourself, even beyond your own lifetime as you’ve sought your vision? If not, you may be missing the true potential of your life.

The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader