Are You Committed or Overcommitted?

by Audrey Andersson, Executive Secretary
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When we begin a new job there is the danger of a panic reaction. Always there is a period when there is much to do and learn. Allowance is made for a settling in period. But at some undefined point the dynamics change, the honeymoon is over. We are expected to deliver. By nature leaders are committed to the organisations they serve. Christian leaders have the additional component of faith. This can make them more susceptible than most to fall into the trap of over commitment, with the consequent problem of excessive anxiety and stress.

Paradoxically, leadership often means less rather than more free time. Leadership has the possibility of providing greater opportunities to organise work and family life more effectively. However higher visibility often means giving into greater demands, which eat into personal time for rest, relaxation and family responsibilities.

Control of our life demands discipline, the ability to recognise the distinction between quality and quantity of work. Knowing how to organise time for a fulfilling not a fruitless life.

Job cycle
On accepting a new assignment most people are usually full of enthusiasm, ideas and energy. They throw themselves into the job. The more successful and effective the leader becomes, the higher their visibility. In turn this leads to more requests and assignments.

A certain amount of tension is positive. Like elastic we need to be stretched to be effective. However, as work builds up there is the danger that commitment slides into over commitment. Some of the more common warning signs are: Spouses regularly commenting: “He/she is never home”, “When was the last time you ...?” “You never have time for ...”. Regularly recurring personal ethical dilemmas such as: “Do I attend this or keep my promise to do ... with my family?” Recurring headaches, tension, tiredness, inability to sleep, all are possible indicators that you are over committed.

At this point, or preferably before, a leader needs to be intentional and make responsible choices, which will enhance her performance and make him more effective. There are a few practical steps which will help in the choice process.

Job analysis
First, what is the job? Take out the job description, look at it carefully. What are the key tasks? Is that your primary focus? Are there grey areas? If not write one and obtain agreement on it. Clearly defined areas of responsibility are the keys which can enable you to creatively and successfully manage your workload.

We may fill our time with interesting, important and essential tasks, but if they are not part of our job description, we should not be doing them. At the end of the day we will not be judged on how well we did someone else’s work, but what we did our own.

Prioritise
Make a simple list of what needs to be done: not only the major tasks. All assignments should be included. This provides a complete overview and eliminates the distraction of that undone task nudging at the edges of your memory. Include commitments outside the office. We do not live one dimensional
lives. Work and life outside the office impact each other. Remember this list is for your eyes only.

Once the list is complete break the larger tasks into their component pieces. Now prioritise by using a simple A (very important) to F (unimportant) scale. If a number of tasks have the same priority, reprioritise within that category, ie A1, A2, etc.

Two main factors should influence the categorisation: urgency, and importance. However we should also reflect and factor in:

- Spiritual commitments
- Personal commitments
- Family commitments
- Church commitments – even when we are employed by the church, we still have contributions to the local life of the church to make outside of our work.

If in doubt, look at the job description. If it is important but not central to your job description, should you be doing it?

If commitment has already transitioned to over commitment ask the following questions:

- Is it possible to delegate some responsibility?
- Is it possible to negotiate another deadline?
- Is it possible to postpone?
- What would happen if this [task] was abandoned? Would anyone be hurt? What goals might be missed?

If you know that you cannot deliver on time, alert others as early as possible. Forewarned in these circumstances is half way to disarming.

Plan

Having broken down tasks into their component pieces and deadlines, plan how to achieve the required result, particularly if it involves other people. Looking at the required resources for each task will facilitate realistic and reasonable delivery targets.

At this stage look at your commitments outside the office. How do they tie in with your work plans? Have you accepted an appointment which coincides with a birthday or family event? Clashes are inevitable, how they are managed and how we respond, determines whether they are negative, sapping our energy or positive and affirming.

When you have finished ask yourself: What has been forgotten? Always plan in some spare time. There are always tasks which take longer, and occasionally something takes less time, providing a bonus!

Work in progress

My grandfather always used to say “The only reason why Rome wasn’t built in a day was because I wasn’t the foreman”. Him aside, we are all works in progress. Finding the right balance is not a one-off task, but an ongoing challenge.

Taking time to reflect and refocus on a regular basis will help guard against over commitment or focusing on the wrong things, making us more effective leaders and servants in the Lord’s vineyard. It is a truism. If you enjoy what you are doing it is not work but pleasure. ♦

by Bertil Wiklander

Many books on leadership underline that as a leader you need to know you organisation. A special chapter in the book that the General Conference Ministerial Association has issued on leadership is devoted to this (H.W. Lee, Effective Church Leadership: A Practical Sourcebook, 2003, pp. 63-70). We have also underlined this many times in this Newsletter.

Recently, one union in the TED was considering a major change in its organisation in order to make mission more effective. This is good aim. However, the procedure that was thought out for accomplishing this change was not based on knowledge of our organisation – as set forth very clearly in the working Policy – and as a result a very complicated situation emerged, people were divided, and the desired aim was not achieved. Know your organisation means that you lead based on who we are and how we do things as a church. If you fail to do so, your leadership will be inefficient and rather than going forward, your energy will be consumed by putting out fires here and there and nothing good will come out of it.

Besides recommending another read of Harris Lee’s chapter referred to above, I would like to share with the readers what he says as an introduction. These are wise words:

“Effective leaders know their organisations as well as themselves. They know their organisation’s “culture” as well as their own strengths, weaknesses, and goals. This general truth applies to organisations of all kinds, including the church. It also applies to the smaller groups that make up the church, whether leadership groups such as a church council or committee, a junior high class, or a women’s organisation. For effective leadership it is essential to know your group—its nature, its mission, its self-understanding—as well as how it functions.

The church is not easy to understand. One reason is that in the Scripture there are dozens of different images or metaphors for the church. It is family and flock; it is herald and institution; it is salt of the earth, light of the world, and new creation. Of the many images, however, the two most prominent are people of God and body of Christ.

The “people of God” image is a reminder of the human side of the church. We are “of God” —“called, gathered and enlightened” by the Spirit as Luther wrote in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed; we believe Christ is present wherever two or three are gathered in His name. Despite this, however, we are people. Whatever else the church may be, it is always an organisation of people.

But in addition to remembering that we are a people, it is important to remember that
we are a unique people, a called-out people. As the second of the two most prominent biblical images for the church states, we are “the body of Christ.” In the words of Paul to the church at Corinth, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27). To the church at Ephesus Paul wrote, “We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love” (Eph. 4:15, 16). This image is a reminder that the church is always more than a human organisation. As similar as the church may be to other organisations, it is still unique; it is Christ’s body—owing its life and existence to the Spirit of God.

H. Richard Niebuhr maintains the necessary tension between the two images by talking about the church from two perspectives: theological and sociological. The first of these emphasizes the divine aspect of the church—the calling of God, faith in Christ, hope for the future. The other emphasizes the human side of the church—the people, the need of forgiveness, relationships with others, institutional forms. To Niebuhr the church is both human and divine, a dynamic theological and social reality. For an adequate understanding of the church is necessary to maintain the tension between the two.

The Lutheran confessions reflect both the human and divine aspects of the church, witnessing on the one hand to the church’s divine source and reality and, on the other, to its human qualities. The following two statements serve as examples:

“The church is not merely an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments.... It is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men’s hearts.”

We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world.

The two dimensions of the church are also reflected in the Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It states, on the one hand, that “the church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit,” and, on the other, that it carries out its work through “congregations, ministries, organisations, institutions, and agencies,” in other words, through human means.

The church is both “people of God” and “body of Christ,” both human and divine. While this paradox often results in tension over the church’s goals, structure, and use of resources, it is a tension that cannot be avoided.

To Think About...

A Life of Priorities
I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. John 17:4

When Peter was a young fisherman in Galilee, no one would have thought he was destined to become the passionate leader of a world movement. After all, he had almost no education and probably would have been happy to live the remainder of his life in obscurity. But God had something else in mind, and when Peter met Jesus, his priorities began to change.

Like many leaders, Peter had to learn how to put first things first. In fact, Scripture reveals a lot about the inconsistencies of his behaviour and his many irrational decisions. But the more time Peter spent with Jesus, the more he learned the difference between mere activity and accomplishment.

Like Peter, great leaders sift through the many things that demand their time, and they discern not only what needs to be done first, but also what doesn’t need to be done at all. That starts with a passion to excel. When you focus your passion on what’s most important, your leadership climbs to new heights.

The 21 Most Powerful Minutes in a Leader’s Day

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3 Ibid.
4 The Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, chap. 4, paras. 4.01; 4.03.
5 Harris W. Lee, Effective Church Leadership (Silver Spring: Ministerial Association, 2003), 63-64.