Arriving in a new district or taking up a new position in an organisation is always fraught with anticipation, uncertainty and worry. This was particularly true when my husband took a pastoral position in an area with which he was not familiar. Shortly upon arrival, one well-meaning church member offered him very insightful advice. He said: ‘You cannot tell the people from our region what to do; you can only invite them to follow you’. What are the leaders’ characteristics that will inspire others to follow?

There is no shortage of literature identifying the most pertinent qualities that every good leader ought to have. We are told that amongst other traits leaders should possess cognitive strength, analytical reasoning, technical skills, inspirational motivation, vision, integrity, fairness, confidence and emotional intelligence. It is to be expected that a highly intelligent pastor or head of a department who oozes with confidence will generate respect from his congregation or his team. However, there are some indicators to suggest that it is in fact emotional intelligence, or as some termed it emotional literacy, that separates ordinary leaders from those capable of great things. What is more, it has been suggested that an ‘emotionally illiterate life’ that is often accompanied with emotional numbness and inability to respond to the emotional needs of others, is a significant shortcoming of those called to lead others.

Emotional intelligence, a concept that emerged in the 80s, has gradually entered into the vocabulary of psychologists, counsellors, life coaches and other professionals and it seems to be here to stay. However, what is emotional intelligence or emotional literacy? One of many available definitions suggests emotional intelligence to be ‘effective awareness, control and management of our own emotions and awareness and understanding of other people’. This human quality has captured the imagination of researchers resulting in what appears to be a convincing argument for the benefits of emotional sensitivity whilst pointing to the shortcomings in the case of its absence.

The far-reaching consequence of limited, or even non-existent emotional awareness is documented by an evaluation of the leadership qualities of past American presidents. Following the analysis of public communication, organisational capacity, political skill, vision, cognitive style and emotional intelligence of eleven presidents the authors acknowledge that ‘in the world of imagination it is possible to envisage a cognitively and emotionally intelligent chief executive, who happens also to be an inspiring public communicator, a capable White House organiser, and the possessor of exceptional political skill and vision. In the real world, human imperfection is inevitable, but some imperfections are more disabling than others.’ Having identified several presidents who despite some noteworthy historical achievements are responsible for ‘the most unhappy episodes of the twentieth century’ the authors reach a bold conclusion: ‘Beware the presidential

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Cont’d from page 1—Emotional Intelligence: The Most Important Leadership Quality?

contender who lacks emotional intelligence. In its absence all else may turn to ashes’. This strong statement is not surprising given that an absence of emotional insight appears to have a profound effect not only on the leaders’ ability to understand his or her co-workers, but it is also responsible for the inaccurate appraisal of self. Daniel Goleman identified self-awareness as the first quality possessed by emotionally literate leaders. This includes ‘having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs and drives.’ What is it that is making me happy, fulfilled and content? What, when and who brings the worst out in me? These are just some of the questions that need answering in an attempt to become an emotionally aware individual. Those people, the author continues ‘are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather, they are honest with themselves and others.’

A good starting point in becoming in tune with self and others is a systematic appraisal of ones own strengths and weaknesses. This soul-searching exercise is not about naming what I should or ought to be good at; instead, it seeks to identify the areas in which I do particularly well, the skills I accomplish with ease, and the tasks that capture my imagination. It is about the input that generates positive feedbacks from those I know are honest with me. Having identified all of my strengths, my limitations need careful and sincere consideration. Which aspects of my job make me very anxious or do not result in a positive response from others? What would those closest to me identify as my weakest point as a leader? Do I need help with any aspect of my life? Conducting an accurate evaluation of one’s weaknesses has the potential to contribute to a realistic approach to the challenges that any job brings. This is expected to include utilising strengths appropriately whilst being careful when engaging in the areas recognised as weaknesses. Furthermore, identifying appropriate strategies that will address the weaker aspects of my own performance is also an important aspect of this self-discovery.

An additional benefit of being aware of one’s own strengths and weaknesses might result in increased confidence as well as in the readiness to acknowledge one’s own limitations. I have recently been asked to teach and work closely with a young, sharp and very intelligent scholar who is leading some ‘cutting edge’ work in his area of expertise. It would be dishonest of me to omit the fact that I was concerned about his apparent limitations. He apparently ‘knew little about’, and his modesty about his expertise made him not only approachable but also stimulated learning. This is not surprising because genuine humbleness, not unlike empathy, to be discussed next, is a quality that has enabling properties.

Empathy has been acknowledged as an important dimension of emotional intelligence that, whilst most easily recognisable, is frequently absent from the repertoire of essential leadership skills. And yet, an empathetic leader might be able to prevent the team and individuals from becoming overwhelmed, disillusioned, and even depressed in the course of duty. He or she will not remain silent about the professional challenges or personal hardships his co-workers are going through. Showing genuine interest in his or her workforce will be an integral aspect of the leadership style employed by an emotionally literate leader. Empathy discussed here however is not an ‘business-like’ sentimental style of leadership, but a leadership capable of taking notice of employees circumstances, feelings and ability ‘in the process of making intelligent decisions’. These leaders are in tune with ‘the messages beneath the words being spoken’. This will also include unequivocal respect for others as well as commitment to understanding the way culture impacts upon human interactions.

As a social work academic I am frequently involved in attempting to teach students to be both aware of their own feelings as well as being sensitive to the needs of those they will be working with. Positive regard for every individual alongside a related set of traditional values that, amongst others, includes acceptance, a non-judgmental attitude and a respect for people are deeply embedded in the knowledge base and skills passed on to social work students. Despite the noble intentions and genuine motivation of most students, this approach to training often feels as though one is trying to teach budding social workers to create a beautiful master-piece by ‘painting by numbers’. As a Christian who teaches at a State University I often question whether it is indeed possible to develop those qualities through education and training alone? Could it be that identified leadership techniques, including the emotional intelligence, might remain just a mechanical exercise without drawing on the power available to those who have a meaningful spiritual life?

There is no doubt that many Adventist leaders are known for their excellent leadership that includes the vast repertoire of skills expected of an effective Christian leader. Equally, as most leaders know, in the ‘hustle and bustle’ of pursuing the common goal, it is very easy to overlook one’s own emotional needs alongside the needs of co-workers. I have attempted to argue that a leadership that is committed to developing the emotional intelligence that includes keen knowledge of self and dedication to the understanding of others has the potential to overcome this omission. I would like to conclude by acknowledging that emotional intelligence that draws from Christ’s example and uses his power in achieving this goal will give real meaning to this important leadership skill. After all, He was the ultimate leader who only needed to say: ‘Follow me’, and the rest is history.

7 Ibid.

Thinking Differently … Thinking Possibilities

Art of Possibility


By Bertil Wiklander

This is a book about how you can transform your entire world by thinking differently, namely, by thinking possibilities. Consider this:

A shoe factory sends two marketing scouts to a region of Africa to study the prospects for expanding business. One sends back a telegram saying,

Situation hopeless stop no one wears shoes

The other writes back triumphantly saying,

Glorious business opportunity stop they have no shoes

Both see the same reality but they think differently and therefore they see differently and act differently.

What do you see as a Seventh-day Adventist church leader when you look at the church and its mission in Europe? What is your perspective? Do you think possibilities?
If you do the same thing many times and, because it seems to work, you repeat it again and again, a certain practice is established. Is your practice of doing church and mission or delegating and controlling the way you want it to be done? Are you repeating the same practice, although everything around you screams at you: “It doesn’t work anymore”? Or have you begun to learn the art of possibility? Changing your practice by thinking differently?

Thinking possibility is what Christ suggested to us. He told us not to see things in the way we are used to see them but to see them with the eyes of God. And therefore, Christ told us that if we have faith like a mustard seed, we would move mountains! Our faith is “the victory that has overcome the world” (1 John 5:4). Church leaders have always needed faith, but today we need to emphasize our need to have faith in God with whom all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

If these thoughts intrigue you, this book will be good reading. It is the product of an extraordinary partnership. It combines Benjamin Zander’s experience as conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra with Rosamund Zander’s genius for creating innovative paradigms for personal and professional fulfillment. Through uplifting stories, parables, and personal anecdotes, the Zanders’ invite us to become passionate communicators, leaders, and performers whose lives radiate possibility into the world — and into the Church.

They start with the revolution in the theory of knowledge (epistemology) that modern Western society has experienced in the past decades. All serious thinkers agree today with Einstein that “It is theory which decides what we can observe” and that it is nonsense to found a theory on “observable facts” alone. Those of us engaging in biblical interpretation have known this for some time (see, for example, my own work published in 1984, Prophecy as Literature: A Text-Linguistic and Rhetorical Approach to Isaiah 2-4). The meaning of a written text is dependent on what theory of text you have and what data you relate it to. In the same way, our reality as leaders, our church, and our mission in Europe are dependent on what we choose to relate it to — to the hopelessness produced by standard practice, or the new ways we discover by means of possibility and faith in our powerful God.

This is not a big book and very entertaining reading. I will therefore not go into detail in presenting it here. Rightly read, it can benefit your personal life and faith, as well as your leadership very significantly.

The whole book is organised into 12 practices – new ways of thinking about life where possibility is fundamental. One of them is “creating a framework for possibility” (pp. 160-179). This is about restructuring meanings, creating visions, and establishing environments where possibility is spoken — where the buoyant voice of possibility overcomes the strong gravitational pull of the downward spiral. The steps to the practice of framing possibility are:

1. Make a new distinction in the realm of possibility: one that is a powerful substitute for the current framework that is generating the downward spiral.
2. Enter the territory. Embody the new distinction in such a way that it becomes the framework for life around you.
3. Keep distinguishing what is “off the track” and what is “on the track” of your framework for possibility.

And then encapsulate all this into your vision which you live and talk and teach and walk as you impact your surroundings. Don’t worry if people think you are fanatic about the vision. If you have made sure it is from God, you are doing the Lord’s work and He will be with you.

I was also intrigued by the idea of “enrolment” (p. 125): “Enrolling is not about forcing, cajoling, tricking, bargaining, pressuring, or guilt-tripping someone into doing something your way. Enrolment is the art and practice of generating a spark of possibility for others to share.” The authors refer to the practice in the Middle Ages, when lighting a fire from scratch was a difficult process. People then carried about a metal box containing a smouldering cinder, kept alive throughout the day with little bits of kindling. This meant that a man could light a fire with ease wherever he went, because he always carried the spark. The authors go on to note that our universe is alive with sparks: “We have at our fingertips an infinite capacity to light a spark of possibility. Passion, rather than fear is the igniting force. Abundance, rather than scarcity is the context.”

The conclusion is that the practice of enrolment is about giving yourself as a possibility to others and being ready, in turn, to catch their spark. It is about playing together as partners in a field of light. And the steps of the practice are:

1. Imagine that people are an invitation for enrolment.
2. Stand ready to participate, willing to be moved and inspired.
3. Offer that which lights you up.
4. Have no doubt that others are eager to catch the spark.

Adapted and integrated into our faith in God as Seventh-day Adventist church leaders, this book may change the way you think and work. May God bless you as you grow and develop in serving Him!*

* John Gottman: “In the last decade or so, science has discovered a tremendous amount about the role emotions play in our lives. Researchers have found that even more than IQ, your emotional awareness and abilities to handle feelings will determine your success and happiness in all walks of life, including family relationships.”

—From Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child

The Heart of Leadership

So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples’ feet.

John 13:4-5 (NIV)

When you think of servanthood, what do you envision? Servanthood is not about position or skill. It’s about attitude. You undoubtedly have met people in service positions who have poor attitudes toward servanthood, and just as you can sense when a worker doesn’t want to help people, you can just as easily detect whether a leader has a servant’s heart. The truth is that the best leaders desire to serve others, not themselves.

True servant leaders...

♦ Put others ahead of their own agenda.
♦ Possess the confidence to serve.
♦ Initiate service to others.
♦ Are not position-conscious.
♦ Serve out of love.

Servant leadership is never motivated by manipulation or self-promotion. In the end, the extent of your influence depends on the depth of your concern for others. That’s why it’s so important for leaders to be willing to serve.

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