


PART 2

ON THE JOURNEY



*I was
cupbearer to
the king
(1:11).*

—Nehemiah's
preparation for
leadership

Nehemiah's Leadership Journal

Chapters 1:1—2:10

Nehemiah's Call

(1:1-3)

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

Nehemiah's Confession

(1:4-11)

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. . . . saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah's Commission**(2:1-6)**

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?"

It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

Nehemiah's Courage**(2:7-10)**

I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of God was upon me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

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THE CUPBEARER

LEADERSHIP FOR SURVIVAL

EACH TIME I read Nehemiah's story, I am stopped by his statement "I was cupbearer to the king." This simple sentence is filled with meaning for understanding the leadership of Nehemiah. As cupbearer for the king, he is being prepared by God for the special task of rebuilding the walls of the Holy City. The model of the crucible helps us understand him and his preparation for leadership.

The Crucible of the Cupbearer

The Context of Exile. The story of Nehemiah's leadership journey begins with his serving as the cupbearer for the king of Babylon. Jews have been exiled in that distant land for 125 years. They are subjects of King Artaxerxes I (464-423 B.C.), the most dominant and dictatorial ruler among the kingdoms of the Middle East. Fifty years earlier, Ezra the priest and 50,000 Jews were given permission to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the city, the holy Temple, and its walls. They succeeded in building the Temple, but their attempt to rebuild the walls collapsed under assault from neighboring enemies. So as Nehemiah's story begins, the Jews in Jerusalem are a despised remnant, living among ruins, fearing for their safety, and languishing under the reproach of being "a worm" among nations. Back in Babylon, the Jews who did not return home in the original company are enjoying unusual success, especially in commercial ventures.

The Character of the Man. Nehemiah is a man who is

among the best and the brightest of the Jewish minority in exile. As cupbearer to a despotic king, he has taken the menial task of being a butler to the king and elevated it to the highest position of trust. Some students of ancient history even suggest that he might have become the confidant of the king with an informal influence equal to a prime minister. Despite his success and the temptations of the royal palace, he does not compromise his faith, forget his roots as a Jew, or abandon his life of devotion in prayer and worship.

The Fire of the Crucible. As cupbearer for the king, Nehemiah is in the white-hot heat of a crucible. Every day he lives with the ultimate risk of failure. He has only one task, and that is to assure the king's safety by taking the first sip of his wine. Every cue is read as he performs his task. A false smile or an unintended frown puts all systems on red alert. Like Nero in the Coliseum, just a turn of the king's thumb can mean death to the cupbearer. Sipping the wine is the defining moment, but preparing the wine is the leadership task.

Competencies Learned in the Crucible. What are the competencies that Nehemiah learns from the pressure cooker of the crucible? First and foremost, *Nehemiah learns to serve under authority*. It is an axiom of leadership that you cannot lead with authority until you learn to follow authority. In the case of Nehemiah, he is under the heel of an authoritarian boot. He has his choice. Will he be a wimp, a rebel, or a leader? The way in which an individual handles authority is a key to leadership development.

I recall two subordinates in institutions where I served. The first was a graduate of a military academy who had learned the meaning of orders and obedience. Even though our styles of leadership differed measurably, I knew I could always trust him to take charge in my absence without trying

to usurp my authority or break the chain of command. Another member of one of my leadership teams proved to be the opposite. He had been abused by the inconsistent authority of an alcoholic father, and his brilliance thus carried the shadow of rebellious ambition. Time and time again, I had to deal with his attempts to undermine my authority, alienate his peers, and demean his subordinates. Our relationship vacillated between deference and defiance until the line of trust was broken and we had to part company. Whether for good or bad, the fire of the crucible determines how we handle authority.

As cupbearer for the king, *Nehemiah also learns how to analyze a situation and prepare a working plan.* His responsibility as cupbearer begins long before he takes a sip of wine from the king's cup. He has to have an overall plan and fail-safe process that reaches all of the way back to the vineyards where the grapes are grown and advances with exacting steps until the life-and-death moment when the cup is put to his lips.

One of the defining characteristics of effective leaders is the gift of being "first-class noticers." They see things that others do not. Long ago I read the biography of Bob Cousy, probably one of the greatest point guards in basketball history. Cousy's uncanny ability to make blind passes was explained by the fact that he had unusual peripheral vision so that he could see the whole floor at one time. Bennis and Thomas find this same gift among great leaders. They have a broader vision of the field for leadership action and see a wider range of options for leadership choices than nonleaders. In the simple sentence "I was cupbearer to the king," we can infer that Nehemiah is a first-class "noticer," seeing the scope of his task, making his plan, and understanding his options.

With his own life on the line, *Nehemiah is a quick learner who knows how to articulate a plan, command people, and pay attention to details.* When our life is at stake and survival is our motivation, there is no room for debate, delays, or indecision. Nehemiah has to act with precision, exercise authority over people, and avoid the slipups that can be fatal. It is often said, “God is in the details.” For Nehemiah, his life is in the details. There seems little doubt that he is a perfectionist in dealing with every step in the process that brings wine to the king’s table. One can imagine his developing a demanding process with personal checkpoints along the way. Just as the king’s trust stops short of taking his word that the wine was safe to drink, Nehemiah has to take the same precaution with the vinters of royal vineyards and the sommeliers of royal wine cellars. He never enjoys the luxury of calling together focus groups before making a decision. More often than not, the result is “inclusion without conclusion.” In this instance, Nehemiah has to be a hands-on leader with micromanagement as part of his style.

When dealing with a life-and-death decision at every meal, *Nehemiah learns how to anticipate conspiracy and adapt to crisis.* Artaxerxes’ position as the most powerful of Middle Eastern kings makes him the prime target for external attacks and internal conspiracies. Because he cannot be voted out of office, he would have to be toppled from his throne by war, assassinated by guerillas, or betrayed by his own people. We can imagine the thick tension surrounding the preparation of every meal and every decanter of wine. Add then the rumors that will circulate and the real threats that will come—Nehemiah has to be a crisis manager with a nose for cues that might signal a conspiracy. When others panic, he has to remain consistent, steady, and faithful.

Finally, in the crucible of the cupbearer, *Nehemiah learns how to be accountable for the results of his work*. Usually when we talk about accountability, we are talking about qualitative, long-term, and often intangible results. Nehemiah's task does not permit him that privilege. Every time he puts a cup of wine to his lips, he lives or dies with the results of his work. Feedback is instantaneous. Educational theory tells us that students who get quick feedback on the quality of their work learn more and better than those whose feedback is delayed. If so, Nehemiah has to be a first-rate learner with daily reinforcement of the consequences.

Leadership for Survival

When a leader faces life-and-death decisions on a daily basis and survival is the all-consuming motive, it is no surprise to learn that Nehemiah's leadership style is both authoritarian and authoritative. He is authoritarian because his task gives him no margin for error; he is authoritative because his impeccable character earns the trust of his subordinates. Because his leadership is so narrowly defined, it limits the transfer of his style and systems to other situations. When life is at risk and survival is at stake, we need a no-nonsense leader whose word is law. Also, when we are dealing with a process that is narrowly defined, and the end product is a tangible target, we see that the competencies that Nehemiah learned in the crucible of the cupbearer are essential to success. Underlying the competencies, however, is the character of the man. Integrity, authenticity, and consistency are qualities that transfer with leadership in any situation.

Competencies from the Crucible

A summary of the competencies that Nehemiah learns in

the crucible as cupbearer to the king shows us how God readies him for the next level of leadership. Nehemiah learns to do the following:

1. Serve under authority
2. Analyze the situation
3. Activate the people
4. Attend to detail
5. Anticipate conspiracy
6. Adapt to crisis
7. Account for the results

Out of the heat of the crucible, Nehemiah is prepared for the challenge of leadership by learning competencies for survival, maintaining the integrity of character, and earning the king's total trust.

Developing Our Leadership

Exercise 3

Put yourself in the position of being the “turnaround manager” for a declining organization, whether in religion, education, or business. Your task is to lead a narrowly defined project targeted toward tangible results on a limited time schedule with individual or institutional survival at stake. Plan that project by going through the following checklist of competencies learned by Nehemiah in his role as cupbearer for the king.

1. Under what *authority* do you lead?
2. How do you *analyze* the situation under which you must work?
3. What is the felt need that will *activate* your people?
4. How will you *articulate* your plan and command your people?

5. How will you *attend* to detail as a hands-on leader?
6. What internal or external opposition do you *anticipate*?
7. Is there a potential crisis in the process to which you will have to *adapt*?
8. What are the timely, targeted, and tangible results for which you will be *accountable*?

As you can see from these questions, Nehemiah's experience as a cupbearer prepares him for a hands-on style of leadership in a survival-type situation with quick turnaround on accountability. Are these competencies transferable to a leadership assignment that is larger in scope, more complex in nature, and higher up the scale of human motivation? Nehemiah's call to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem is that kind of challenge.