MENTORING LEADERS IN HIERARCHICAL SOCIETIES

A Dutch researcher, Geert Hofstede, found several cultural traits that help to define a company or society. One of those traits he called "power distance," which includes how strongly leaders believe that the efforts of their followers are a result of the leaders' decisions. "Distant" leaders feel that they alone have the right and might to make decisions. Their followers either agree with them or are afraid to openly differ with them. Where both leaders and followers agree that this is they way things are and ought to be, they can get done what has to be done.

When we in the West talk about "servant-leaders", we usually mean leaders who both seek the welfare of their followers and, at the same time, show an attitude of humility with a willingness to listen to one's followers. Western missionary and congregational leaders generally look upon themselves as servant-leaders, while covertly criticising non-western leaders as autocratic, hierarchical and self-seeking. This MentorNet does not attempt to assess the accuracy of those views, but presents a biblical approach to training leaders in "high" power distance societies and organisations.

When Paul advised Timothy, "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also," he was advancing more than an inexpensive, efficient way to transmit lessons. Indeed, the practice of creating "training chains' derives from a powerful principle that works equally well in high and low power distance cultures. Leaders expand their powers not by grabbing and retaining privileges but by empowering an increasing number of newer leaders who remain in a voluntary, father-to-son, master-to-disciple relationship with their mentor.

In effect, **servant-leaders and autocratic leaders can, alike, fail to raise up new leaders** for the same root cause: love of pre-eminence. The servant-leader may serve till his strength is gone, while never raising up new leaders, nor training them to share pastoral responsibilities. This happens when a servant-leader mistakenly finds his own selfish fulfilment in working harder than others and, in his opinion, loving more than they. Either kind of leader simply does not want to share his power, influence or privileges.

The solution to the problem of raising up leaders in hierarchical, autocratic societies lies in leaders' **creating and fostering of voluntary accountability among their trainees**. To the extent that a leader will find, appoint, commission and mentor new leaders, who will do the same for others, new leaders will emerge. Their new congregations and cells will have trained leaders and can reproduce. It is not necessarily the "hierarchical" leadership style that must change, but the leaders' obedience to Scripture in mentoring and empowering new leaders who will likely remain loyal to them. Instead of "climbing the organisation's ladder" to get more power, one has only to add new "rungs" to the ladder below oneself to reach a place of positive, far-reaching leadership.

Several tactics can be employed in working within high-power distance societies. These can be tried and evaluated in each place.

- **Let new leaders start, develop and lead their own congregations**. Self-seeking power mongers gravitate to the top of organisations and congregations on the merits of their education, family connections and facility in the national language. Most will not start a church and are willing to let it stagnate at a level where it can provide a comfortable salary and social prestige.

- **Plant churches mainly among the poor and powerless**. The poor are usually more sensitive to the social injustices that have allowed the powerful to rise, and quickly develop resistance to being bullied. While the poor cannot remove powerful leaders, they know how to pray, "Oh, Lord bless and keep the bishop, keep him far from us!"

- **Train your own leaders**. Avoid sending men off to attend elitist educational institutions. Without intending to create a clerical class within their movement, educators do, in effect, instil within their students an attitude of superiority based upon academic learning. Bible school and seminary graduates generally do not deem non graduates fit to lead congregations and cells and will not trust "mere laymen" to lead new groups, even if the latter meet every one of the biblical qualifications of elders. Students also imitate the leadership style that teachers model in an institutional classroom, which is often quite dictatorial.

- **Empower the obedient for ministry now**. Amazingly, at the beginning of the 21st century, in spite of abundant evidence accumulated by mission researchers, many missionaries and pastors still choose the "promising" young men and send them off to Bible school or seminary to become the "future leaders of the church". Choose for training and leadership only mature men who have already undertaken to lead their families and witness in their social networks. After a few years of pastoral leadership, some of these should, indeed, seek advanced education.

Undeniably, it is precisely in the autocratic societies of the world that faith in Jesus is **spreading most rapidly**, and 100s of new congregations and cells are formed every day of the year. It is in the low-power distance, democratic nations that the Christian movement has stagnated. Thus, to start new congregations in a widespread movement for Christ, we do not need humbler attitudes amongst leaders as much as high or low power distance leaders who will empower newer leaders who will learn to do the same, in turn.

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