

Nehemiah, A Good Leader and Project Manager: Recipe for Christian Leaders in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Leadership is key to the sustenance and development of human society. Several spheres of human world have failed due to inadequate leadership. The research observes that continents like Africa and Asia are suffering from good leaders; this is because reasonable percentage of development materials and things needed rests in the bosom of leaders; they are in control of everything that belongs to everyone. The research sets project management as an important part of a leader's job description. Project management is a human activity that is integral to the development of the society and even the church. Thus, project management is an issue that is worth discussing; its importance and significance cannot be overemphasized. The book of Nehemiah reveals that execution of a great project and the character 'Nehemiah' as someone who ultimately demonstrates several elements that are essential as an effective leader and project manager; this makes the person of Nehemiah relevant to this research. Thus, a good project manager is definitely a good leader. The effectiveness of the Nigerian Church is tied to her understanding and reality of being controlled by a Nehemiah type of leader.*

Keywords: Nehemiah, Leader, Project manager.

Introduction

In the fifth century B.C., during the height of the Persian Empire, the Jews were living in exile in the heartland of the empire (Esther 5:9-11). The Sovereign God; however, had different plans for His exiled people. Through prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Lord God had declared that He would one day restore the covenant people to the promised land (Jer. 33:7-9; Ezek. 36:24-28). The Old Testament Books of Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah chronicle events surrounding the Lord's restoration of Jewish exiles to the Promised Land.

The book of Nehemiah opens with the account of Nehemiah receiving a report about Jerusalem's distress that its walls are broken and its gates are on fire. Nehemiah was no preacher or pastor; he was a Jewish cupbearer to a king named 'Artaxerxes', who reigned from the city of Susa.¹ Nehemiah acquires the king's favor, and goes to Jerusalem with the king's letters giving him safe passage and resources from the king's forest. (Neh 2:1-10). This understanding opens Nehemiah to the commencement of a mighty project which is to be executed. As a result, this work presents a discourse on Nehemiah as a good example of project manager.

Nehemiah: A Great Leader

God rose up Nehemiah to accomplish an important mission; therefore, God is the active agent leading and directing. This is evident in how He moves in the king's heart and elevates people to do his bidding. This is seen in both the lives of Nehemiah and his contemporary, Ezra. Nehemiah demonstrates the indisputable role of Providence in leadership. This is still true today.² There are no shortcuts in leadership. The meteoric rise of leadership studies and the attention that many leaders attract may cause some to miss the simple fact that leadership is challenging. Nehemiah exemplifies the interplay between prayer, planning, and hard work; if which this three attributes is integral to project management.³

Although Nehemiah faced a daunting project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, this project was secondary to the plight of the people. Nehemiah is regarded as the wall builder in Jerusalem, and this is the theme that resonates in the book.⁴ But his story is not only about building the physical walls of Jerusalem for physical protection, it is also a story of building spiritual walls around the people with the Word of God and thus building up

¹ R. Rendtroff, *The Old Testament: An introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 454.

² J. A. Pearce & R. B. Robinson, *Strategic management* (New York, NY: McGraw-hill, 2013), 74.

³ Rendtroff, *The Old Testament: An introduction*, 458.

⁴ C. Palmieri, *Satisfying success: And the ways to achieve it* (North Charleston, SC: BookSurge, 2009), 65.

the people as well. Therefore, Nehemiah managed the physical project which significantly affects the spiritual project of Jerusalem.⁵

The skillfulness of the character of Nehemiah as a leader and a project manager is observed by the researcher at the cradle stage of the project. Nehemiah opened his heart to the king. He first addressed the king with respect and then expressed his deep concern in the form of a question.⁶ The presentation of the question gave the king latitude either to abruptly end the conversation or to graciously seek to help his heartsick servant. Nehemiah referred to Jerusalem as the place where his ancestors were buried.⁷

From a clear perspective, Nehemiah carefully chose his words, framing his concern in nonpolitical and nonreligious terms. In doing so, he calmed any potential suspicions.⁸ Instead of immediately telling the king what he wanted to do, Nehemiah sparked the king's compassion and understanding. A godly leader keeps leading even when the projects end. Certainly Nehemiah faced adversity and conflict in the midst of building the wall, a task that required fortitude to see to completion. When the wall was built, he continued to lead through political means as a governor.⁹ In view of this, the research further elaborates the background of this discourse (revealing what actually transpired in the preparation process) in the next section of the research.

Background to the Discourse

Nehemiah held the servant role of cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of the Persian court in the capital city of Susa.¹⁰ In the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, Nehemiah learned from his brother Hanani, who visited him that the Jews who survived captivity were quite distraught because the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and its gates were ruined by fire (Neh. 1:1–3). Nehemiah was a man with a mission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.¹¹ The news of the disrepair of Jerusalem, the once beautiful city of David and Solomon, brought sadness, spurring him to do something to right this terrible tragedy. By the virtue of the captivity, Nehemiah was clearly in no position to do anything in Jerusalem. Yet God had positioned him in just the right place to accomplish this mighty work.¹²

Four months elapsed from the time Nehemiah received the news about Jerusalem until he had an opportunity to speak to the king.¹³ What did Nehemiah do during those four months? Nehemiah 1:4 suggests that he continued to pray and looked for an opportunity to help.¹⁴ The researcher assumes that he thought about ideas for getting the wall rebuilt what materials would be needed, how to acquire them, and where to rally the workforce. He wanted be ready when God showed him the right moment to act. During the month of Nisan (the first month on the Jewish calendar), Nehemiah was carrying out his normal duties as cupbearer. Wine had been delivered, so Nehemiah tested it before giving some to the king. He always performed this duty with a good attitude, because it was standard practice to enter the king's presence with a pleasant demeanor. This time, however, the king recognized that his normally happy cupbearer was heartsick about something.¹⁵ A sudden wave of panic washed over Nehemiah. He had violated the cupbearer's code of conduct. It was an uncharacteristic lapse in his work ethic. But it was also an opportunity to trust God and to explain his situation to the king.¹⁶

⁵ Rendtroff, *The Old Testament: An introduction*, 459.

⁶ <https://www.vergenetwork.org/2014/07/08/four-leadership-lessons-from-nehemiah/> (Accessed on Jan 31st 2019).

⁷ Most ancient people groups treasured their ancestral burial grounds. A family's living members were responsible for preserving and maintaining the burial site. The king of Persia knew this, and he sympathized with Nehemiah's concern over the broken-down condition of his ancestral city.

⁸ Rendtroff, *The Old Testament: An introduction*, 464.

⁹ Rendtroff, 465.

¹⁰ The royal cupbearer was one of the king's most trusted officials; he put his life on the line for the king every day. The cupbearer had a dual role: first, to taste whatever the king desired to drink, ensuring it was poison free; second, to provide security for the king's living quarters. Nehemiah's job wasn't menial; it was a role of influence and honor.

¹¹ D. M. Hoffeditz, *They were single, too: 8 biblical role models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 43.

¹² R. Rendtroff, *The Old Testament: An introduction*, 465.

¹³ Hoffeditz, *They were single, too: 8 biblical role models*, 45.

¹⁴ Palmieri, *Satisfying success: And the ways to achieve it*, 66.

¹⁵ G. R. Hickman, Organizational change practices. In G. R. Hickman (Ed.), *Leading organizations: Perspectives for a new era* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010), 510.

¹⁶ J. A. Pearce & R. B. Robinson, *Strategic management*, 85.

In view of this, Nehemiah's work was accomplished through an active prayer life, providing a vision to his followers, using his closeness to King Artaxerxes to receive help, role modeling, adaptability, and foresight. Nehemiah paid close attention to his followers' needs and was tenacious in accomplishing his goals.¹⁷ As a result, Nehemiah's role changed from that of royal cupbearer to governor of Judah because he utilized multiple leadership strategies in accomplishing his project goal (rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem).

Nehemiah's Skills: An Explicit Analysis

The book of Nehemiah was not written to be a manual for spiritual leadership or project management; it is important to note that Nehemiah was a spiritual leader and a project manager.¹⁸ Thus, the book of Nehemiah is somewhat unique in the meticulous details provided by the narrative; meaning that God does desire us to see how the task of rebuilding Jerusalem's city wall was accomplished and how Nehemiah managed that great project.

The Provision of a Vision: Leaders are individuals who have "a clear vision of the future state of their organizations. This vision helps direct followers toward a common goal and empowers them with knowledge that they form a vital component serving to accomplish that goal. Nehemiah had his vision in mind; he clearly communicated it to others. Communication of vision is a starting point for the commencement of a project.¹⁹ In other words, people must actually understand and get a glimpse (sometimes, they might not understand it all) of what the over-all project manager has in mind. Hence, the problem of the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem and the disgrace felt by the survivors of the exile is solved by Nehemiah's vision of rebuilding those walls.²⁰

Therefore, this vision was not merely stated to King Artaxerxes, but to the people of Jerusalem, of whom he garnered support. Three days after arriving in Jerusalem, he said, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace" (Neh. 2:17). He assured them that God graced him with the plan and Artaxerxes backed him.²¹ Their response to Nehemiah's vision was greeted positively, "Let us start rebuilding," they proclaimed (Neh. 2:18). The people needed to hear Nehemiah speak about his vision. This means that people are not motivated by project but by leaders who inspire them opening their eyes to certain understanding through their uttered speeches on the project to be commenced.²²

Prayer: At the heart of leadership is communication between God and the project manager, which is Nehemiah. In this case, the project manager can be referred to as the leader. Therefore, a leader must know God's purposes for a group before he can communicate them. Upon receiving word of the exiled Jews' distress, Nehemiah immediately asked God for discernment. In Nehemiah 1:4, "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. for some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." By praying and fasting before taking on such a monumental task, he was able to seek the counsel of the almighty prior to embarking on the responsibility of assisting the Israelites. Nehemiah realized that "prayer is a necessary leadership habit that enhances communication with God and secures vision for ministry."²³

While in the presence of King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah prayed before responding to the king's question of what he wanted. It was immediately following this prayer that Nehemiah received his vision for the ministry. He answered Artaxerxes, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, and let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it" (Neh. 2:5). Of course, Nehemiah did not

¹⁷ Hickman, *Organizational change practices*, 512.

¹⁸ Nehemiah: Explore the Bible, https://s7d9.scene7.com/is/content/LifeWayChristianResources/005695957_ETB_Nehemiah_Samplepdf.pdf (Accessed on 16th Feb, 2019).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ J. Aryee, Leadership principles from Nehemiah, 2009. *Modern Ghana*. <http://www.modernghana.com/news/199774/1/leadership-principles-fromnehemiah-i.html> (Accessed on 31st Jan, 2019).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ability to delegate responsibility and authority is one of the management skills of Nehemiah (4:19-23). This has a direct connection with the communication of the vision to the people. Delegation of duties in the project gives the people a sense of belonging, importance and responsibility and a serious heart to work.

²³ P. Schwartz, *Inevitable strategies* In G. R. Hickman (Ed.), *Leading organizations: Perspectives for a new era* (2nd ed) (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010), 78.

end his prayers after receiving his vision for the restored future of Jerusalem. He continued to ask God for guidance and help throughout the project work. Nehemiah received his power through God, the source of all power and might. The entire restructuring of Jerusalem was enveloped in the power of prayer, as evidenced in how often prayers are lifted up within the entire book of Nehemiah.

Power: Often times, people who have the prerogative of managing a project have access to power. Therefore, the dispensation of power in their jurisdiction means a lot to the success of project. Nehemiah's position as the royal cupbearer to King Artaxerxes allowed him the ability to exercise influence on a king's policies. Nehemiah did what successful leaders do; he used that leveraging power to his advantage. Artaxerxes was aware that Nehemiah was a man of character and integrity, so he granted his requests to return to Judah, as well as giving him letters of reference and a government grant for building materials.²⁴

Planning: The requests of letters for the "governors of Trans-Euphrates" and for "Asaph, keeper of the royal park" (Neh. 2:7-8), demonstrated forward-thinking strategic management acumen. This takes place to "observe and interpret the interaction of forces that might affect the project and all that are connected to it. By evaluating possible risks ahead of time, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem with a plan prepared for the task at hand. Planning is cardinal to the success of any project; little wonder Nehemiah took his time to plan. Therefore, planning is a vital part of successful project management and execution Nehemiah took because it helps to:

1. Think ahead and prepare for the future.
2. Ensure the right direction.
3. Identify issues that will need to be addressed.
4. Consider whether a project is possible.
5. Make the best use of resources.
6. Motivate staff.
7. Ensure smooth running of projects

Attending to Team's Needs: Project management involves the process of interaction between team members and the leader. Specifically, the project manager which is the leader of the team, attends to the "followers' needs, values, and morals."²⁵ In view of this, Nehemiah epitomized the transformational leader; he was genuinely concerned about and sees to providing for the welfare and rights of those he leads. This includes seeing to it that those responsible for any task have the appropriate tools and the understanding of what's expected of them in carrying out their responsibilities. He cared deeply for the concerns of the people; his entire vision was catalyzed upon hearing of the distress of the postexilic people of Jerusalem and Judah. Nehemiah not only set out to rebuild the walls so proper worship of God could be restored, but rescued the poor from oppression and slavery, refusing to receive his lawful allowance from the people while as governor, and caring for their moral and spiritual needs in all sphere.²⁶

Perseverance: While many stop trying to reach a goal when troubles arise, those who persevere continue in order to "see a commitment through to completion. Despite the opposition from adversaries, Nehemiah persevered. In fact, he showed the tenacity throughout the entire project. Nehemiah could have easily listened to his brother Hanani explain about the distress of the postexilic Jews and, while wanting to do something about it, convince himself that he did not have the opportunity to accomplish the task of rebuilding since he already had a responsibility as cupbearer to Artaxerxes.²⁷ Instead, he persevered with the vision of the reconstruction by requesting a leave of absence from his duties.

In the same vein, Nehemiah was steadfast when disgruntled Jews complained of their fellow Jews charging them interest (Neh. 5:1-13). Also, when further opposition came from Sanballat and Geshem plotting against him, Nehemiah pursued onward with the task at hand, not allowing them to veer him off his focus. The same held true when prophets like Noadiah attempted to intimidate Nehemiah. His attention to his work and people never failed (Neh. 6:1-14). In a mere fifty-two days, the wall was completed (the twenty-fifth day of Alul Neh. 6:15); the vision became a reality.

²⁴ E. Coggins, *Contrasting leadership styles in postexilic Judaism—a comparative analysis of Ezra 9:1-5 and Nehemiah 13:23–27* in *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* (Chicago: Alvin's Books, 2012). 33–51.

²⁵ A. Stanley, *Visioneering* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 1999), 78.

²⁶ J. Antonakis, *Transformational and charismatic leadership* in D. V. Day & J. Antonakis (Eds.), *The nature of leadership* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2012), 541.

²⁷ A. Stanley, *Visioneering*, 93.

The result of Nehemiah's management skills was the successful completion of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, where then stood, unto the glory of God and His purposes for many centuries. Because of Nehemiah's godly and effective leadership in the construction project, the people were encouraged in the Lord, were drawn together once more into a community through their united efforts and achievement, and were reaffirmed in their dedication to the Lord. They were so transformed that they demanded of their leaders that they be read and taught God's Word once more, and then they took it seriously.

Nehemiah's Skills and Christians Leaders in Nigeria: Application

In the discourse so far, the researcher noted that Nehemiah might not be the first person with the idea to rebuild the wall. Many people might have a desire in their heart to do it. Nehemiah didn't create the excitement, he shared a mission that grabbed the excitement they already had and he worded it in a way that the people believed they could do it. He took initiative. He didn't want for anyone else to do it. He asked the king if he could go to Jerusalem. He asked the king for the materials he needed. He asked the king to provide protection for the travel. He went to the city and did rebuild the walls.²⁸

Nehemiah's heart and spiritual vision set him apart as a leader and project manager. Something is noteworthy in Nehemiah's prayer: "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man" (the king). Nehemiah was willing to pray that God would use him to change the situation. He was available and willing to act. No doubt many lamented the state of the wall, but had anyone done anything about it. Delegation of works is good but project managers should not sit on the sideline complaining or barking out orders, they lead by example and they lead by action, and others file in line behind them. The altar of prayer should not be traded for anything in the Nigerian Church; not even for prosperity preaching. Ministers of God should lead members to seek God's face and emphasize the importance of prayer in everything they do. It is important to note that prayer is an important instrument as seen in Nehemiah's leadership track record. On this note, Church leaders must direct the Nigerian Church on the strength of prayers.

Nehemiah showed them what was possible; he told them how God had been so gracious to him in the presence of the king.²⁹ He said "let's." He knew that he could not rebuild the wall alone. He was going to rebuild the wall with them.³⁰ He knew that city transformation had to be done together. Nehemiah would work alongside them the entire time and with his money.³¹ The people of Judah knew that if they could rebuild the wall, their descendents would always remember that it was them. This was a chance to make history because they were faced with the leveled walls every day.³² Church leaders in Nigeria must always be driven with the mindset that whatever they do in the course of their leadership is not only for the present generation but also for posterity; therefore, it is imperative that leaders take the generations to come to heart. An adage says 'If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.' In all sphere, it is expected of a project manager to plan ahead of time. As implored by Nehemiah in his project management; planning clarifies goals and develops vision, it establishes the reason for doing something and it achieves the best results. By implication, a project might not be successful if it's not properly planned and the plan is not properly executed. It is unfortunate that some leaders in the Nigerian Church seems not to have a vivid goal and aim, this inherently affects the Church. There is a need for many Church leaders in Nigeria to re-visit their aims, goals and objectives and those that do not have one should create; because this is like a map that guides the journey of a leader.

When a Church leader does not have any foresight; the members seems to be in jeopardy. Several Christian leaders in Nigeria accord themselves diverse titles, awards and degrees but Nehemiah never considered any of this, instead, he served whole heartedly. Many church leaders in the Nigeria today cherish their titles (such as; Bishop, Evangelist, Reverend, Pastor, Prophet, Most Snr. Apostle, Lady Evangelist, among others), showing themselves instead leading the people aright and executing the assignments committed into their hands faithfully.³³ Many run after achieving academic awards and degrees with will be in respect to their names and add to their status in the society; this in the recent time have become competitive. Church leaders in Nigeria have lost the consciousness of the owner of the ministry, blindfolded by what they call themselves and what people call them; calling God's work

²⁸ M. Marshall, *What it means to be human* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2001), 54.

²⁹ <http://christopherscottblog.com/nehemiahs-model-for-creating-an-inspiring-mission/> (Accessed on 4th Feb, 2019).

³⁰ P. G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and practice* (6th ed.) (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013), 232.

³¹ G. R. Hickman, Organizational change practices. In G. R. Hickman (Ed.), *Leading organizations: Perspectives for a new era*, 511.

³² J. C. Maxwell, *Developing the leader within you* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 1993), 76.

³³ Kolawole O. Paul, "John the Baptist: A Model for Christian Leadership for Effecting Change in Nigeria". *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Nov (2019), 36-41. www.apjmr.com.

“my ministry.” This makes leaders in this sphere run after what they will achieve for themselves and not for the common interest of the body of Christ. Clear enough, Church leaders in Nigeria sees themselves as one to be served instead of being the one to serve. Of a truth, Church leaders in Nigeria become rich while the followers become poorer. The adverse of this debacle entails the re-shaping mindset of Nigerian Christians to see church leadership as a means of amassing wealth and riches.

Nehemiah prayed when hearing the news, when sharing his desire with the King of Persia, during the work, when the work was done.³⁴ A nation that oppresses the poor will not last long. The evidence of it is so visible down the history of empires and powerful nations. Nehemiah scolded and reprimanded the rulers and nobles who oppressed the poor. The value of honesty, truthfulness and contentment in Nigerian pastorate is shortchanged for “get rich quick syndrome”. Among Nigerian Church leaders, preaching is a really big business, almost as profitable as the oil commerce in Nigeria. Meanwhile, an evangelistic outreach that is watered down to a mere commercial enterprise can neither revive the Church nor heal the nation.³⁵ The Nigerian Church leader’s emulation of Nehemiah will debunk the “health and wealth preaching” has caused and cost Nigerian Christianity a lot. How desperate the Nigerian need leaders like Nehemiah who have moral integrity who fear God and love the people; who are compassionate and moved by the burden for the people they serve; who will encourage and build the broken cities and walls; create jobs for millions without jobs; leaders who will love and respect the people, regardless of the color, faith or religion; leaders who will commit to working hard, goal oriented and with vision.

Conclusion

Can the Nehemiah’s unique leadership qualities be compared to the modern trend of leadership in the Nigerian church? Instead, leadership is shrouded in conflict for power, lack of compassion for the people, selfishness and greed and no concern or burden for the people. Nehemiah, a person in a servant position, is a transformational leader when apprised of the discontent of the postexilic Jews in Jerusalem and Judah. Nehemiah presents an historic truth that for every great project; there must be an inspired leader. On this note, the study concludes that Nehemiah is an adequate model which leaders in the Nigerian Church can emulate.

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³⁴ R. McNeal, *A work of heart: Understanding how God shapes spiritual leaders* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 87.

³⁵ E. Nihilola, *Theology Under the Mango Tree: A Handbook for African Christian Theology* (Alausa, Ikeja, Lagos: Fine Prints and Manufacturing Limited, 2013), 56.

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