

regular features

# *leadership*: inside-out leadership

John Greenall explores leadership and character



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**W**hen I slammed the door, broke the mouse and let rip some expletives, I knew I had been found out. I was CU president, leading in my church, and generally seen as a 'good bloke'. It was my third year at university and term was nearly over. I felt tired. The computer wouldn't submit my PBL assignment and signs of my rising frustration were there – the raised heartbeat, the steam coming out of my ears and the red mist descending. My subsequent reaction told my watching classmates that it would be wise to steer clear of me that lunchtime. The experience crushed me, because my ability to 'hold it all together' was (and still is) key to my leadership. People are unlikely to follow a hot-headed, rash and impatient person.

In general, I would seek to mask such flaws with my competency. As a medic, I got used to being top of the class, grade As at GCSE and A-Levels, being competent in the eyes of others. Looking around me I could see gifted, motivated and productive leaders. Many of them changing the world. Many of them Christians. But as I pursued the same goal, I increasingly realised something was missing.

## an anatomy of the heart – character, not competency

In this series, we've considered how secular leadership principles, taught to every medical student today, have their limits. We have explored how, in a world where leadership is in perpetual crisis, the Bible is the best leadership manual. But it is a provocative one – because it teaches a leadership which is at odds with that which we find in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Scripture we see God often eschewing those we might expect to be leaders – the firstborn, the physically strongest and so on. Instead, he often chooses people who would appear to human eyes as unfit leaders: Moses was not eloquent,<sup>2</sup> Gideon was a coward,<sup>3</sup> and Simon Peter

was uneducated.<sup>4</sup> We learn that 'man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7), which negates any possibility for human boasting.<sup>5</sup> Paul's instructions on church leadership mention perhaps only one or two skill-based characteristics.<sup>6</sup> The rest are issues of character!

For the purposes of this article we will define character as 'that set of moral qualities that distinguishes one person from others'. For example, perseverance,<sup>7</sup> honesty,<sup>8</sup> integrity<sup>9</sup> and humility.<sup>10</sup>

Even with the secular world cottoning on, many Christian leaders still don't pay enough attention to their character. Growing in competency is, by contrast, a 'quick win', often requiring less graft and leading to more instantly-visible results. My big worry is that amongst medics and nurses we are seeing gifted leaders moving in their gifting and not in the power of the Holy Spirit changing their characters to be more like Jesus. Leaders who neglect character, preferring instead to develop gifts and abilities, medical skills and knowledge. God's word is clear to leaders – rather than your competency, it is your character that will define you.

The capacity of many leaders is so often limited, not due to a lack of competence, but often more subtle personality deficiencies which limit their influence and ability effectively to lead others. They might be defensive, uninviting of criticism, lacking integrity behind the scenes, living in denial, insecure. Do you know leaders like that?

## the diagnosis – character revealed

So how do we assess our character? In healthcare, we love to measure things. There is significant distress among my colleagues when people question the threshold for neonatal hypoglycaemia as either 2mmol/L or 2.6mmol/L or somewhere in between. But character is much harder to assess.

As leaders, however, there is often nowhere to



hide and our character flaws are frequently displayed whether we realise it or not. But there are times when our character is revealed most - in a crisis. What might this look like for us? What did you do the last time your research project blew up at the last minute? Or your laptop crashed and you lost your module essay? Or your housemate left the dishes dirty for the hundredth time? Or you were humiliated by a consultant in front of your colleagues? What did you think? What did you do? Because this reveals your character. Not when you are well-rested, prepared and together. It's when the pressure is on, when nobody is watching, that you go back to your default reactions - you swear, curse, accuse, deny.

### the management plan – character transformed

So how do we grow our character? Many of us are gifted and find our studies and work come relatively easily. Perhaps sometimes we lack the motivation to do the hard graft of working on our character.

Ultimately Christian leaders must seek to lead like Jesus. This means we need his character to be permeating our very being. Jesus led as a servant, but can a person serve others without a servant's heart? I've tried to do this – it's possible for a brief period, perhaps even for your time on CU committee or as a CMF leader. But over time, without this being fully integrated into your person, the cracks will start to show. It's not about trying to serve others more, or seeking techniques to shepherd a team – it's about heart change,<sup>11,12</sup> or what could be called 'inside-out leadership'.

It would be a travesty if CMF grows leaders who are simply shells, devoid of substance and lasting influence. Those who simply perform a role before petering out. Those who impress with their skills, gather a group, lead with charisma - but without the ability truly to transform others through their character.

### the prescription – character grows

So how do we grow our character? This isn't quick-fix medicine. Instead, like a prescription for exercise, we are to work on our character as much as we work on our competency. Many of you work ridiculous hours to hone your medical skills. You might join societies to show your enthusiasm for surgery or paediatrics. But how about focusing even more on growing your character? Perhaps take a weekend away to work on it – pray, reflect, confess, journal. Doing this will result in impact across your lives – both in your relationship with God and others and your work. Analyse your response in your last crisis – can you see jealousy, envy, hatred, defensiveness, resentment, denial? As hard as it is, we are called to repent and ask forgiveness. And then see the crises as an opportunity to grow.

The alternative is that character flaws become embedded and eventually your heart becomes hardened; you become defensive if such flaws are even pointed out. Such leaders become like children in my growth clinic – their growth is stunted. And giving growth hormone becomes less and less effective the further on the leadership line they travel. Perhaps an alternative, if you lead others, is to be vulnerable. Ask people, 'what's it like to be on the other side of me', and be ready for some tough answers.

You will have tremendous influence in the future, so take the opportunity as you study to be transformed to be like Jesus and use your influence to transform others. Pursue 'inside-out' leadership. Don't miss out on the opportunity to grow your character as a student, because just as in the growth clinic, the sooner you make a start, the greater the impact there will be on your life. ■

#### REFERENCES

1. 1 Corinthians 1:20
2. Exodus 3:9-4:16
3. Judges 6:11-12
4. Luke 5:1-11
5. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
6. 1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:5-9
7. James 1:2-4, 12
8. Romans 12:3
9. Psalm 78:72; 1 Kings 9:4-5
10. Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12
11. Proverbs 4:23.
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