



Lessons in Successful Project Leadership from Nehemiah

From Nehemiah

The first chapters of the book of Nehemiah deal with the start-up of a major project. It illustrates the necessity for careful research, including both work at the “desk” level (1:2) as well as that conducted “on the ground” in the field (2:12). It is only after those efforts were completed that Nehemiah actually commenced the construction phase of rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, God's Holy City.

Given the success of this huge project, it is worthwhile to study the chronicles of the entire effort given in Nehemiah to determine what wisdom and practical guidance is there revealed for those engaged in large-scale projects for the Lord in our own day. As we begin our examination, please carefully read chapters 3 through 5, even better, the entire book.

In the first chapters, we see that the people left behind to dwell in the devastated city of Jerusalem were in the midst of great troubles. Yet in their condition of deep discouragement, they seemingly made no effort either to confront or overcome these circumstances. When Nehemiah arrived, one of his first tasks was to work on getting them to change this attitude. He effected a realization in them of the need for a basic change of heart from discouragement within themselves to confidence in the Lord. In this we see evidence of a key principle of effective leadership: an ability to motivate and encourage at the individual, personal level (2:17).

As we examine the way the project was conducted, we can organize our observations generally into three aspects: overall project management, manpower management, and technical project skill requirements.

Overall Project Management Issues

Some of the elements of the overall challenges include a realization that

- People are not motivated by “projects”; but rather by leaders who inspire them. LET US REBUILD! (2:17)
- The motivation of the leader must be honest and rightly based; hidden personal agendas will be sensed and will quickly destroy confidence and support (5:14-19).
- It is necessary to view and understand in a realistic way all the potential difficulties that must be overcome (count the cost). However, at the same time, all available resources must equally well be recognized and mustered for application to the project (2:20).
- Although Nehemiah was blessed by God with an organized mind, he developed his plan in humility before God, seeking His wisdom and guidance (2:12).
- A focus on the ultimate objective must be maintained (goal-oriented leadership), even while careful attention is being applied to each step in the overall process. Attention to detail is obviously important, for an ultimately successful project is really just the assembly of all the detailed parts that go into making it up (3). Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of the leader to ensure that he does not “lose sight of the forest while concentrating on the trees.” Clearly seen in the first two chapters of Nehemiah is his careful, quiet research of the detailed points needed for successful completion of the finally completed wall (6:15).

Personal Leadership Characteristics

In order to become the inspirational leader that is necessary to accomplish big projects for the Lord, it is necessary to develop a number of specific personal characteristics that are demonstrated throughout the book of Nehemiah. These include

- Training skills (2:18B, 4:13,14). Effective training of others depends first of all on the careful definition of the requirements, which, of course, are drawn primarily from the preliminary research carried out in the early stages of any such undertaking. Once these are defined, the leader can then set about selecting his assistants who are skilled in the specific areas that have been identified. These assistants can then carry out the tasks of training and organizing those who will actually accomplish the various detailed tasks necessary for the successful project completion. Recruitment and direction of his assistants is therefore clearly one of the most important tasks of the effective project leader. Investment of himself in motivating, teaching, and directing them is one of the single most important keys to overall project success. At each level, training starts with a clear definition of the assignment, and clear instructions as to how to accomplish it.
- Ability to delegate responsibility and authority (4:19-23). Without this ability in its leader, any project is constrained by the physical limitations of its leader. If he feels compelled to carry out or personally supervise every aspect of a project himself, the project will either have to be sized to fit his own physical limits or else he will shortly become exhausted or overwhelmed (burned-out) and leave the work half-finished. Furthermore, by learning to delegate responsibility to others, the motivation and enthusiasm of others will be greatly increased as they come to recognize the significance of their contributions to the overall success of the undertaking.
- Concern for the welfare of the workers (5:1-13). The good leader can be seen from Nehemiah to be the one who is 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.

Project Management Skills

Aside from his ability as a "people person," any good project leader must also be well versed in certain technical aspects of management. Some of these have already been touched upon earlier. Others include

- Ability to manage, that is, to maintain control of costs and schedule. To do this requires technical skill with figures and their interpretation and summary, for example. In today's world the use of computer programs to track both spending and schedule is certainly nearly a necessity, and lack of such skills and other similar ones needed to run large-budget undertakings (especially with money provided sacrificially by others) should, as a matter of good stewardship be acquired (4:19-23).
- Ability to organize large undertakings into smaller, controllable work units (3).
- Efficiency in managing his own time and the efforts of others (6:3).
- Knowledge (experience) necessary to foresee potential requirements and problem areas so that they can be dealt with properly and not disrupt the work (4).
- Ability to direct and monitor the administrative requirements involved, such as those imposed by governments and local authorities in the form of, for example, travel documentation, permits, labor and building rules, and so on (2:7-9; 7:15,61,64).

The result of Nehemiah's undertaking 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. Furthermore, because of his godly and effective leadership in the construction project itself, 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. Finally, in the joy of their renewed commitment to God and in what He had allowed them to achieve—they celebrated with and elaborate feast!

Literature

- Excellence in Leadership, the pattern of Nehemiah, John White
- <http://churchrelevance.com/rick-warrens-7-principles-of-project-management/>

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