

Nehemiah as a leader



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Dates:

Received: 09 Oct. 2024

Accepted: 26 Nov. 2024

Published: 07 Mar. 2025

How to cite this article:

Tefo, P.K. & Geyser-Fouché, A.B., 2025, 'Nehemiah as a leader', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10293. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10293>

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Nehemiah was in exile and served as a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I of Persia. He exercised leadership skills on behalf of his nation; and as a leader, he did not hesitate to take action that would benefit his people. He necessitated rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls as well as the city. He is portrayed in the book that bears his name, as an exemplary leader whose leadership attributes are worth emulating. This article is intended to probe into Nehemiah's leadership and how it was relevant towards rebuilding Jerusalem's walls and the administration of the entire nation of Judah.

Contribution: The article looks at the definition of a leader, leadership qualities, leadership skills, and Nehemiah's attributes. The article aims to see if Nehemiah fulfilled the definition of leadership and evaluate which qualities and skills he had.

Keywords: Nehemiah; leader; attributes of a leader; leadership; leadership qualities; leadership skills.

Introduction

Ezra and Nehemiah are two figures who were in charge of the restoration of Jerusalem in various ways. However, there is still a debate regarding the chronological order in which Ezra and Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem.¹ Despite the debate, this study is centred on Nehemiah as a leader and how he exercised leadership.² Nehemiah portrayed leadership qualities and demonstrated concern for people and their welfare by being an excellent and godly leader. He revealed that by responding to injustices and hostility in the community of Jerusalem, he organised the community for the work he came to do, as well as handling the impending threats of disruption to the rehabilitation of Jerusalem (Myers 1965:LXXVI). As a leader, Nehemiah's work brought healing and reassurance to the returned exiles. As a result, he acknowledged God's grace in the success of the enterprise and the acknowledgement connected with his personality as a determining factor in its accomplishment (Weanzana 2006:543).

What is a leader?

Mhatre and Riggio (2014:222) argue that leaders are change agents who transform followers into highly inspired, energised and motivated teams. Van Knippenberg and Stam (2014:242–243) define leaders as those who communicate ends; that is, the leader will define those ends, but such leadership also includes the way leaders frame and make sense of more widely shared organisational visions. Influential leaders use the ability to define, frame and communicate collective ends (Wilke & Van Knippenberg 1990:337). A leader guides a group and facilitates the group's behaviour, while followers are likely to accept the suggestions of the leader. In the process of leadership, followers expect the leader to lead the group-to-group achievement. Therefore, the leadership role is a position that any of the group members may occupy.

Daft (2008:3) gives an example of Commander Brad Lee, who was in charge of the San Antonio and served for 18 years in the Navy. As Commander of the San Antonio, Lee built a unified, trusting and motivated command team through effective communication. Commander Lee had leadership qualities which assisted him to strive for difference while he believed in himself as a leader, as well as believing in people he led and worked with. Also, as a leader, he loved his

1. More can be read about the debate in: Anderson (1957); Bowman (1954); Bright (2000); Brown (1998); Fensham (1982); Lemche (2008); Provan et al. (2003); Smith (2010).

2. Leadership is a study on its own, but because of limited space, I cannot go in depth into the study. I am going to focus on a few aspects of leadership. However, the following references can be read on leadership: Abib-Pech (2013); Agbor 2008; Alvesson (2011); Antonakis (2011); Antonakis (2012); Bass (1960); Bass and Riggio (2006); Benington and Hartley (2011); Case, French and Simpson (2011); Conger (2011); Daft (2008); Daliman, Suparti and Ming (2021); Day (2014); De Vries and Balazs (2011); Du Plessis (2016); Gabriel (2011); Gordon (2011); Hansen and Bathurst (2011); Harwati (2013); Jooste (2009); Lussier and Achua (2010); Manning and Curtis (2007); Mhatre and Riggio (2014); Marques (2017); Mofuoa (2015); Ndebele (2007); Nicolaides (2015); Nicolaides and Duo (2019); Northouse (2016); Parry (2011); Pierce and Newstrom (2008); Rickards and Clark (2006); Stokes (2008); Super (2020); Van Knippenberg and Stam (2014); Wibowo and Kurniawan (2022); Willis and Thompson-Moore (2008); Wilson, Mapetla and Power-Drutis (2008); Wulffers (2017); Yukl (2011); Zander and Butler (2010).

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people. The way Commander Lee led his team, made him to be a leader. With that example, Daft maintains that to be a leader means to serve by making a difference in the lives of other people and the world. To be a leader means believing in oneself and those with whom one works, loving what one does and infusing others with energy and enthusiasm. Also, Daft (2008:3) emphasises that when thinking of leaders, attention should not only be paid to those significant historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon and Alexander the Great, but careful attention should also be paid to leaders who are working in every organisation, large and small. What he means is that leaders are in all angles, which means that they are always present in everyday life.

A leader is someone who has a vision and shares it with followers for them to embrace it and work with the leader to bring change. A leader acts as a change agent of the status quo by transforming followers through inspiration and motivation. A leader works towards implementing change by facilitating things to happen and does not stand aside and watch things happen. A leader makes things happen for the better, through people. Therefore, a leader offers service to people to bring a difference in their lives. A leader cares about followers and works hard to make things happen for them and through them. A leader does that by being present with people and ensuring that people get what they deserve better. Having summarised what a leader is, next I am going to compare Nehemiah's qualities with those of a leader.

Leadership qualities

There are several qualities of leadership. Hansen and Bathurst (2011:256) insist that leadership is about decision-making, which requires more than pure rationality. The study of leadership involves understanding the social processes that construct organisations. Marques (2017:17) argues that leadership begins with self-leading and should be purpose-driven to render competence to achieve the most desired goals. Purpose-driven leadership involves firstly, making decisions that have long-term consequences. Secondly, respect must be maintained by acknowledging and appreciating other people's values. Thirdly, morality can be enhanced by being in touch with one's moral values. Fourthly, having a vision and communicating its vision; and fifthly, understanding, which implies changing the strategy when it no longer serves the real purpose and developing new paths to attain responsible goals.

According to De Vries and Balazs (2011:390–391), leaders and followers should understand their strengths and weaknesses. Also, they should be sensitive and be good listeners who are capable of making sound judgements. Moreover, leaders need to develop followers to become future leaders; in that way, leaders will impact the lives of followers since the test of a leader relates to performance by their successors. Leaders are to give followers an opportunity to learn and allow them offer constructive feedback, accommodate their emotional needs and allow them to be creative within organisations. Olanisebe and Olaniyi (2011:9) maintain that nation-building

is an initiative that requires people's concerted effort. For leaders to deal with nation-building successfully, they must possess certain qualities. Some of the qualities of leadership include: integrity, honesty, commitment and competence. Nehemiah demonstrated patriotism and displayed serious and deep concern after he heard the news that the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins. He then took an initiative with other Jews in Persia to go to the land of Judah and engage in the rebuilding process (Olanisebe & Olaniyi 2011:10).

Leadership qualities are vital for a leader to exercise the leadership role. Different leaders possess various leadership qualities. However, there are certain leadership qualities that define a true leader who can drive followers towards a shared vision to be able to accomplish the task at hand. Some leaders are in leadership positions, but their leadership style does not yield the intended results because of a lack of collaboration with followers. Leadership is what people do as they express their deepest feelings and thoughts, when they do their work with passion and integrity, bearing in mind that everything matters as they do their work (Ndebele 2007:2).

Leadership skills

Leaders demonstrate supervision that involves many responsibilities with more tasks which the leader cannot handle alone. Therefore, for leaders to be successful, they must use time wisely and demonstrate interpersonal skills to accommodate followers. The leader does this by empowering and delegating responsibility to followers and giving authority to followers to perform and accomplish specific tasks that they may not usually perform (Stokes 2008:23). Furthermore, effective leaders seek opportunities to improve their leadership skills that make them effective in counselling, coaching and mentoring followers. When leaders use these skills, they can interact with followers to improve their job performance and increase two-way communication. Interaction between a leader and followers results in opportunities to discuss specific follower concerns and job performance to make recommendations for improvement.

Good communication between leaders and followers is an opportunity to use interpersonal skills to develop followers to increase organisational effectiveness and relationships between leaders and followers (Stokes 2008:24).

Antonakis (2011:273) states that there are two paths to leadership. These paths are the actuality path and the ascription path. He argues that the actuality path explains why traits might contribute to the effectiveness of a leader through technical and social skills. On the other hand, the ascription path explains the trait that allows leaders to emerge, although the emergence of a leader does not guarantee its effectiveness. By this, Antonakis means that individuals appear as leaders through the ascription path. However, they become effective if (1) they possess fundamental traits that anticipate effectiveness or (2) people select them based on a particular trait as individuals.

Furthermore, Antonakis (2011:281) argues that there are valuable traits in practising leadership that are advantageous in selecting individuals who are most likely to demonstrate leadership and effectiveness in leadership positions. Therefore, the use of valid leadership trait models has significant, economic and ethical implications.

Gabriel (2011:403) argues that leading is imagining, willing, inspiring and driving. He reiterates that without imagination there is no leadership since imagination means envisaging new possibilities, products, ideas, methods and alliances. Consequently, leaders are people who dream and who draw on their unconscious wishes to imagine things that may seem unrealistic, impossible or absurd to others. Meanwhile, leaders do not just dream since dreaming is not just enough. Leading requires a determined person with a burning desire to realise a vision. Therefore, being willing to dream means having a strong dream with motivation towards fulfilling it. Hence, visualising and willingness are significant in leadership, and they need to be implemented.

A leader is someone who dreams and yields vision. By so doing, a leader demonstrates belief in oneself and communicates the vision to other people intending to believe in them to drive the shared vision towards a common goal. A leader acts as a change agent by bringing change to the status quo. A leader gives direction, guides and facilitates the process. This means that a leader not only dreams of what needs to be done, but also works alongside people to accomplish the intended results. Vision is a crucial element in leadership because it helps leaders to stay focussed on the project at hand. It is worthwhile for leaders to communicate the vision and be versatile by creating a room for improvement when needed. Leaders are people entrusted with decision-making. As they do, they collaborate with followers to ensure that decisions made are for a common goal. Leaders make sound judgements on behalf of other people as they lead them. They appreciate people by identifying their potential, giving people opportunities to learn and being aware of the needs of subordinates. Leaders lead, among others, through integrity, honesty, commitment and competence.

Leaders make wise use of time. They possess a skill of time management. This means they are sensitive to time as they lead particular projects and ensure they complete projects within a stipulated time. Leaders empower people through effective coaching and mentorship. They embrace communication as a tool for the success of projects. They are self-confident, influential and effective people who ensure followers perform to their ability.

The background³ around Nehemiah is that the Jews had been in exile in Babylon and ended up under the Persian rule, during which Nehemiah became a cupbearer to the Persian

3. I cannot describe the socio-historical or religious background in detail here. But details in this regard can be accessed in: Fensham (1982); Myers (1965); Smith (2010).

King. While in Persia, Nehemiah received news that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins. When Nehemiah heard of the situation, he requested the King to permit him to go and rebuild the walls. This was a time when he exercised leadership qualities to ensure that the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem had to begin. Nehemiah and other Jews worked together under his leadership until the work was complete.

Attributes of Nehemiah as a leader

According to Neusner (2004:24–26), the biblical world experienced a high degree of social, political and religious transformation from the 5th century BC, after the people of Judah returned from the Babylonian exile. Challenges, in all forms, prompted the initiatives of leaders with a clear vision, leaders whose prospect for the future would be guided by the spirit of self-awareness, the urge for nation-building and religious and social transformation. Neusner contends that Judaism, as a socio-religious system, was born as a response to the uncertain future following the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land and kingship. He further maintains that Pentateuchal Judaism flourished up to the Second Temple Period because it was laid in the hands of the priests, hence forming a solid ground for the socio-religious and political order under Ezra and Nehemiah.

Nehemiah portrayed certain qualities of a leader. He had trust in God which he demonstrated through prayer because of his strong faith in God. Also, he assured people of the greatness of God, a basis to pursue his vision (Abraham et al. 2023:205). Nehemiah had the quality of planning in mind. He had forward-thinking strategic management by requesting letters to ease his journey to Jerusalem. Also, he assessed possible risks to devise a plan (Kolawole 2020:16). The spirit of discernment which Nehemiah had assisted him in thinking about the future and making plans for the rebuilding project of the walls of Jerusalem he was about to begin. Through planning, Nehemiah was able to make provisions to overcome obstacles which would obstruct his vision; he planned accordingly for his departure as well as for what was needed to accomplish the project (Abraham et al. 2023:206; Muthuku 2020:69).

Nehemiah had integrity, which enabled him to make high decisions. He made impartial decisions and reprimanded officials, executives and workers alike. Integrity embraces words fulfilled in one's actions and values. Integrity aided Nehemiah to stick to his words, and he was able to carry out the mission emanating from his vision to be able to realise it (Ming et al. 2021:15). He had the element of delegation at heart. He handed over some responsibility and authority to other people according to their abilities as a sign that he was aware of the potential in different people and wanted to develop other people into future leaders (Wibowo & Kurniawan 2022:199–200). Nehemiah was a great administrator and knew what to do, how to do it, and who was to do it. He had a clear objective or goal with a sound

and good enlistment of the programme. He was capable of analysing situations and people. As the administrator, he succeeded in mobilising people for the success of the project (Apuuivom 2020:19–20). Also, as an exemplary leader, he initiated strategic steps to realise the vision and communicated it to stakeholders (Nainggolan et al. 2022:2). Nehemiah had leadership skills which assisted him in bringing fellow Jews together for a shared effort. Jews who believed in his ideology became part of the team responsible for reconstruction and became leading activists towards the revival and rebuilding of the wall (Ugwu et al. 2021:91).

Wibowo and Kurniawan (2022:200) argue that Nehemiah faced opposition from his adversaries who tried to hinder the progress of the construction of the Jerusalem wall. Nehemiah resisted opposition and remained focussed on the work. According to Abraham et al. (2023:204), Nehemiah demonstrated decisive leadership when he refused to meet his enemies as part of resisting opposition. He was a good organiser and was able to face challenges when rebuilding the walls and mobilising the people of Judah into groups (Abraham et al. 2023:205). Nehemiah held firm to the work despite opposition (Ogochi 2018:87). Nehemiah demonstrated courage and perseverance when he faced opposition from his adversaries. Yet, he held firm throughout the project to realise its completion. Opposition did not distract him since he focussed his attention on his work. Nehemiah's attitude regarding the rebuilding project instilled courage in people to continue with the project despite their challenges (Kolawole 2020:16).

How Nehemiah employed his attributes

Nehemiah put his trust in God in the mission he had to accomplish. When faced with opposition from his adversaries, Nehemiah prayed to God for intervention against the threat of his enemies (Neh 4:9). His trust in God demonstrates that he did not do things alone. Though he knew that he could do some things, he noticed that he could not carry out such a mammoth task without involving God. Also, Nehemiah removed fear from the people by pointing them to God as an encouragement. He reminded them about the greatness of God and that they should put their trust in him. Nehemiah trusted in God and allayed people's fears.

It is crucial to consider planning as an essential aspect when initiating any project. Nehemiah had to prepare for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. After hearing the news about the walls lying in ruins with the gates burnt, Nehemiah had a vision to address the situation. He pondered on how to see the success of what he had as a vision. Among other things, he sought permission from the King of Persia to go to Jerusalem safely. Through that, Nehemiah could think ahead and prepare for the future to ensure that the direction he had to take was well planned. Planning assisted Nehemiah in identifying issues for the rebuilding project and identifying relevant resources to ensure the smooth running of the project. Nehemiah went through a careful planning process because he wanted to realise the success of the project he had to undertake. His proper planning for the project, enabled

him to take a very short time to complete the project. The planning process was a crucial phase for Nehemiah.

Nehemiah had integrity which helped him to make decisions of a high standard and to be able to face challenges without fear to achieve the desired goal. Integrity enabled him to understand his call. As a result, he was patient and hopeful for completing the project at hand. He was an accountable leader and had the capacity to organise the efficient rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Also, he ensured that parties involved in the rebuilding process had clear roles and responsibilities for the smooth running of the project. Nehemiah made impartial decisions through integrity and rebuked officials and workers alike (Neh 5:7).

The task of the rebuilding of the walls was huge. Consequently, Nehemiah delegated some duties and responsibilities to others and provided them with necessary resources for specific tasks. As part of the delegation, Nehemiah appointed doorkeepers, singers and the Levites, and ordered them to do their jobs. Nehemiah's handing over the supervision of the wall to Hanani and Hananiah (Neh 7:1–73) was an indication of delegation of responsibility for the work to run well. Meanwhile, Nehemiah did not just delegate; he identified potential in people and wanted to empower them to do more with their talents and skills. Nehemiah did not only distribute the responsibility, but he worked alongside people as they continued their tasks, and supervised the rebuilding project to ensure that everything was in order. Nehemiah led by example. He knew what to do, how to do it, and who to do it. He analysed the situation in Jerusalem and identified people to do the job.

Nehemiah had a vision as a leader and communicated it to other people so that they could embrace it. Nehemiah set an example through vision that leaders should have vision because they cannot lead well without vision. After he conceived the vision and shared it with people, he organised people so that they could all drive it until it was realised. He successfully mobilised people so that the project could be completed (Neh 3:1–6:16) despite the hindrance caused by his adversaries. He did not leave the people to do the work alone. Instead, he devoted himself to the work of the wall together with his men (Neh 4:16) and was always with them to give direction. Nehemiah had courage and perseverance and could resist opposition inflicted by his adversaries.

As a leader, Nehemiah employed some strategies to accomplish the leadership task of rebuilding the walls. He was a man of prayer and sought counsel from God through prayer. This demonstrates that Nehemiah did not rely on his strength alone but regarded prayer as a crucial element while engaging people to do the work. Faced with the enormous task of rebuilding the walls, Nehemiah had a vision of how he would go about with the project. The vision assisted him in determining the direction he had to take concerning the sad news in Jerusalem. Nehemiah shared the vision with other people by communicating it to them. People embraced his vision and ran with it by committing themselves to it.

The sad news that Nehemiah received from Jerusalem about the walls, which lay in ruins with the gates burnt, was a priority for Nehemiah to ensure the restoration of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a strategic leader in the manner in which he approached the task of rebuilding the walls. Through the vision, he formulated a strategic plan to address the situation in Jerusalem. He took the situation in Jerusalem as a priority over everything else and hence sought permission from the King of Persia to allow him to go and change the state of affairs in Jerusalem. Since Nehemiah was in a position of power in Persia, he could leverage his power to facilitate the rebuilding of the walls through securing resources. Also, people listened to him as he shared his vision and supported him by committing to be part of the rebuilding project as he proposed. Nehemiah could look forward to the impact his vision would have on the people. As a result, his vision was beyond the rebuilding of the walls since he wanted to restore the glory which city used to have. Among others, his vision included carrying out the reforms of the social and economic life of the people. Therefore, he adapted to the situation to pursue his vision, which was intended to bring something different to Jerusalem's state of affairs at the time.

Looking at the definitions of a leader, Nehemiah demonstrated the qualities and skills of a leader. When he first heard the news that the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins and gates were burnt, Nehemiah prioritised that situation over everything else. He decided to leave his position of being a cupbearer and sought means to address the situation in Jerusalem so that he could correct it. In that way, Nehemiah became a visionary leader and acted as a change agent who wanted to make a difference in how things were in Jerusalem. He had a vision to address the situation and communicate it with other people who committed themselves to rebuilding with him. Nehemiah worked with people to realise the successful completion of the project and coached and mentored people during the process. He resisted opposition and directed the people to continue despite opposition inflicted by his enemies. Nehemiah applied his leadership attributes and skills to ensure that the rebuilding project was a success through time management.

Conclusion

In this article, definitions of a leader were provided. These definitions demonstrated what a leader looks like and how followers perceive a leader. Leadership qualities were offered from various angles to measure what enhances good leadership. Also, skills required for leadership were discussed to note their significance for leadership. Leadership qualities and skills were provided as aspects that enable leaders to exercise sound leadership to achieve a common goal with followers. Nehemiah was offered as a leader in Judah who demonstrated valuable attributes of a leader to enhance his leadership style. As a leader, Nehemiah was measured against leadership qualities and skills to see if he was a leader. Lastly, the article demonstrated how Nehemiah utilised leadership attributes to accomplish his vision and that he can be regarded as a leader.

Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on the author's, P.K.T., thesis entitled 'Nehemiah's transformational leadership and nation-building strategies: Interpreted in the context of Lesotho' towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2025, with supervisor Prof. A.B. Geyser-Fouché.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

P.K.T. contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing of the original draft. A.B.G.-F. contributed to writing, review, editing and supervision.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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