



# Creating Space to Lead

## A Guide for Small and Diaspora NGOs

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## 1. Why should anyone be led by you?

Leadership may sound impressive, but it is immensely difficult. 'Leading is very likely the most costly thing you will ever do. And the chances are that it will never bring you riches or fame or praise in exchange for your great sacrifices', according to Dan Allender (2006). What makes leadership so difficult? Partly it is because leadership is not just about an individual, but about relationships. We know how complex and difficult relationships can be. Also it is because ultimately it is leaders who are responsible for making the tough decisions.

Given that leadership is so tough, we need to ask ourselves: 'Why should anyone be led by you?'<sup>1</sup> It is a tricky and challenging question. Yes, we may have experiences, wisdom and gifts. But we also bring our weaknesses to leadership. We know we are nowhere near perfect. What is worse, if we are honest, most of us do not bring the best of ourselves to our leadership. There are often times at work when we are tired and frustrated – even overwhelmed. We lose patience with other people when they fail to deliver what we hoped for. While many of us know what we should do as leaders, we just do not have enough time to put it into practice.

We cannot lead well when we are run down or over-stressed. We have to be on top form. Many of us are simply too busy to lead well. We need to give ourselves the space to lead to the best of our ability. We need both 'head space' to think clearly and 'heart space' to bring our emotional wisdom to leadership. This paper explores how we can do this by being:

- Strategic in our own life – prioritising our commitments so we can devote quality time to our leadership
- Investing in caring for ourselves, so that we bring the best of ourselves to our leadership

## 2. Leadership is all about relationship

Leadership, like friendship, is not about any one individual. It is the relationship between people. Leadership can take place throughout an organisation, but we usually think of it at the senior level, typically between the Director and the staff. But leadership is also enacted in the relationship between the board and the Director (and even within the board).

Therefore, our leadership is profoundly affected by others' behaviour, not just our own. Followers' expectations of their leaders exert a powerful influence. We often see this in the ways people change when they take on leadership roles. We know only too well how political leaders take office to redress the autocratic extremes of their predecessors, only to become the type of leader they once despised. Perhaps it is not solely because they change, but also because the way people behave towards them changes.

None of these Presidents probably imagined they would be saying these things before they took over as leaders:

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<sup>1</sup> Goffee R and Jones G (2000) Why should anyone be led by you? *Harvard Business Review*, Sept-Oct

*'There is no number two, three or four. In Côte d'Ivoire there is only a number one: that's me and I don't share my decisions.'*

President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire

*'I would like ministers, assistant ministers and others to sing like a parrot after me. That is how we can progress.'*

President Daniel arap Moi, Kenya

*'The chief is the chief. He is the eagle who flies high and cannot be touched by the spit of toads.'*

President Mobutu Sese Seko, DR Congo

*'I want to be blunt. As long as I am here and you say I must be your President, you have to do what I want, what I like, and not what you like and you want. Your Kamuzu is in charge. That is my way.'*

President Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi

While these are extreme examples, many good leaders also suffer because followers have unreasonable expectations. Followers are deeply ambivalent about leadership. On the one hand, people want their leaders to be different so they can look up to them and even put them on a pedestal. They want leaders to be perfect. Yet, on the other hand, they want leaders to be approachable and human, people just like them, people who share their values and opinions. Inevitably, leaders do not measure up on either count.

Another danger in such circumstances is that followers abdicate responsibility to the leader. Staff are able to do their 9-5 jobs, leaving the leader to work evenings and at weekends. However much leaders would like to delegate, staff simply do not want to take the responsibility. So despite good intentions, leadership can become autocratic due to the behaviour of followers.

Managing relationships is complicated. All relationships take time and hard work on occasions. A key role for a leader is to develop their staff through this relationship. John Maxwell describes staff development as 'the most important lesson of leadership' (Maxwell, 1993, page 179). Some leaders estimate that more than 30 per cent of their time is devoted to this (Hybels, 2002, page 133).

Think about leadership and management in football (as described in the accompanying Praxis Note '[World Cup Special: How to build a winning team](#)') or any other sporting, theatrical or musical team. It is clear that leaders spend most of their time developing staff – training them, rehearsing them for their performance. Great football managers like Alex Ferguson attest that there is no bigger priority than spending time with the players. For NGO leaders there is no greater priority than one-to-one time with staff individually as well as in teams.

### 3. The buck stops with the leader

Leadership is challenging because it involves relationships. It is also challenging because it is the role of leaders to take the tough decisions. There are rarely obvious, easy

decisions for leaders. There are usually winners and losers. As Max De Pree says (quoted in Wright 2006):

‘Leadership is the risk of deciding when the alternatives are equal. It does not require leadership to choose when one choice is obviously better. Leadership is the risk of choosing when every choice might be right or wrong.’

As leaders, we will not be universally popular. We will cause offence. One of the key reasons for this is that, in today’s fast-changing world, any good leader has to be a leader of change. They have to help their organisation adapt to new realities. This is far from easy. Bringing change is not popular with everyone. As historian and diplomat, Niccolò Machiavelli, observed some 500 years ago:

‘There is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to administer than to introduce a new order of things, for he who introduces it has all those who profit from the old order as his enemies, and he has only lukewarm allies in all those who might profit from the new.’ Machiavelli (1513)

Today, leaders must be agile in the face of change. Our work contexts are changing rapidly and in unpredictable ways. Leaders have to make informed guesses about the future in order to make decisions and move forward. We have to persuade others to follow us when there is no guarantee of success. We will not always get it right. At times, we will fail. People will blame us. In time, every good leader will disappoint everyone. Leadership requires of us an acceptance that we will not be liked. Leadership is not a popularity contest.

It is so tempting to put off the difficult decisions. We hope difficult situations will miraculously resolve themselves. Poor leaders put off making decisions until it is too late. They prevaricate and this delay damages the organisation they are meant to be leading. As John Adair points out, ‘It is always better to take change by the hand and lead it where you want it to go before it takes you by the throat and drags you off in any direction’ (Adair, 2002:233).

To decide *on* something requires deciding *against* other options. Sometimes as a leader you will effectively be axing jobs. This is challenging for any leader concerned about their staff. But sometimes, in focusing too much on the staff, they are actually disloyal to the mission itself. Misguided loyalty to staff diverts them from necessary hard decisions. The primary responsibility of the leader is to the mission, not to the staff.

Jim Collins’s ground-breaking research on the most successful organisations over the past 50 years found that one of the most crucial elements to success is getting the wrong people off the bus (and the right people on board and in the right places) (Collins, 2005). NGOs are notoriously bad at getting the wrong people off the bus. We mistakenly believe that people who are unable to perform can only be redeemed by keeping them. By focusing on the individual, rather than the mission, we can lose our way. We need courage to get the right people on board. But this does not mean that we surround ourselves just with people we like, with people who just tell us what we want to hear. We need people who are deeply committed to the good of the organisation, not to pleasing us.

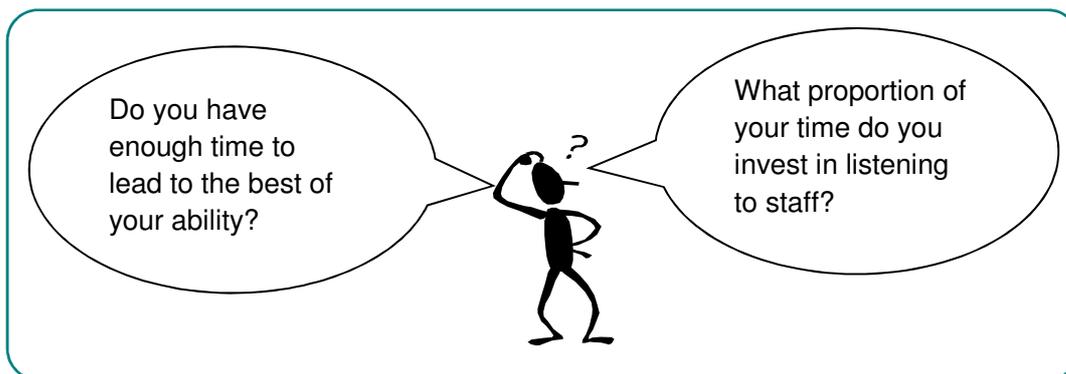
Not surprisingly, then, leadership is lonely. The higher you rise in leadership, the fewer your real friends at work. Few friendships can survive one person having significant

authority over the other. People relate to you differently. They are rarely as open with you as they used to be. Leaders carry many burdens for others. Yet, they often feel unappreciated and can even sometimes feel betrayed.

## 4. Create space to lead

We have seen how incredibly demanding leadership is. To perform well requires us to be at our very best. Yet many of us are simply too busy to lead well. We do not have the time to give us the intellectual head space or the emotional heart space.

Ask yourself these questions:



To give ourselves the space to lead to the best of our ability requires us to:

1. be strategic in our own lives
2. care for ourselves

### 4.1 Be strategic in your own life

'The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence... It destroys the fruitfulness of [one's] work because it kills the roots of inner wisdom which make work fruitful.'

Douglas Steere<sup>1</sup>

Most of us are too busy to lead to the best of our ability. We need to prioritise our commitments so we can devote quality time to our leadership. We talk about focus and strategy for our organisation, but we do not practise it in our personal lives. It is not clear what is most important in our own life, nor in our leadership life. Most of us would benefit from prioritising our commitments. It is pretty obvious that we cannot simultaneously be a good chief executive, a good board member (of a few charities), a community leader, an engaged spouse and parent... Something will inevitably give somewhere. If we are too busy, we have probably been too lazy or not courageous enough to prioritise. As Ruth Haley Barton says:

*"A busy person is not so much active as lost"* (2008).

The need to say 'No'

Obviously everyone is different, but many of us as leaders take on too much because we find it hard to say 'no'. We are flattered to be asked to take on a new responsibility and we realise that it is something that we can do well and make a significant contribution. But for some of us this inability to say no, is actually a symptom of a deeper malaise – our need to be needed, or perhaps an arrogance that no-one else is as good as me. And this same arrogance means that when we take on more responsibilities we are tempted not to delegate or, if we do, we still end up micromanaging. 'No' is perhaps one of the most important, but under-used, words in the vocabulary of a leader.

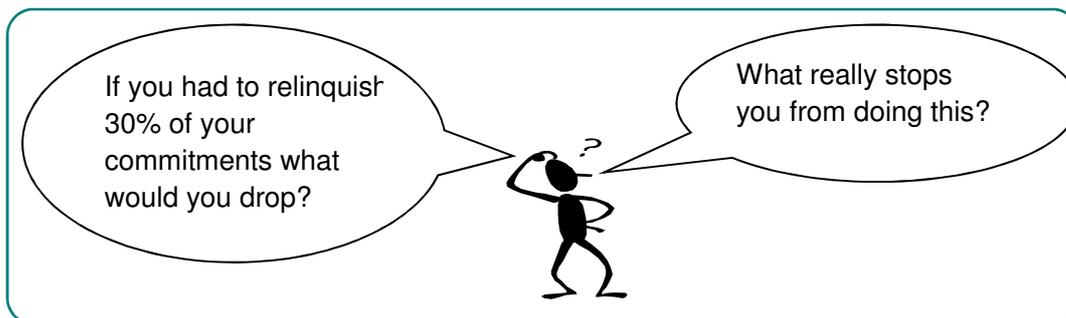
What happens when we get over-extended?

When we fail to prioritise our commitments, we find that we become:

- **more autocratic.** Too much stress easily becomes a vicious spiral. As Harold Geneen points out: 'Most CEOs slip into authoritarian roles without realising that the process is going on. Subtly they change because it is easier and less time-consuming to be authoritarian.' The more autocratic they become, the more they take on themselves and the less they trust and value others.
- **too involved in the operational and not able to raise our eyes to the strategic level.** When we do not have enough time to think, we become too short-termist and start taking poor decisions.
- **too busy to devote enough quality time to leadership role.** For example we often fail to prioritise the relational element of our leadership.
- **lonely and isolated.**
- **irritable, frustrated, possibly burnt-out.**

Many of us resist the idea of limits. We see limits as something to overcome. But none of us is superhuman however much we try. We cannot do everything. We cannot serve everyone. If we try to do too much we will exhaust ourselves and may damage those around us. Conversely knowing and living within our limits is helpful to us and those around us. But this needs self-control and good time management in particular.

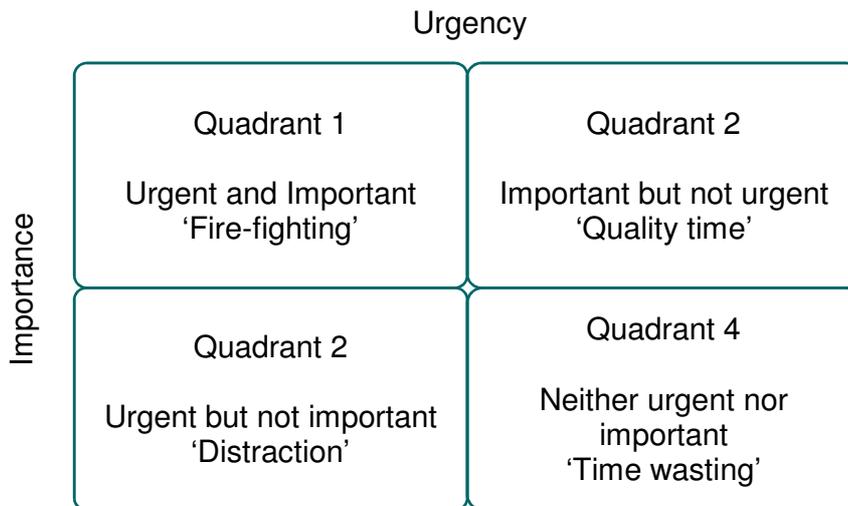
Ask yourself these questions:



How do we manage our time?

Time is a limited commodity. But it should be our friend, not our enemy. So many people talk about time as being 'against us'. Instead we should see time as a precious gift to look

after wisely. Each new day will never come again. Steven Covey<sup>2</sup> provides a helpful way of analysing how we spend our time:



Time management exercise:

1. Put your activities of last week into these quadrants:
  - Which of your leadership activities fit in each quadrant?
  - What do you see?
  - What are the results of too much time being spent in different quadrants?
2. How can you put more time in Quadrant 2? Given that initially this can only come from Quadrants 3 and 4, what will you change?
3. How will you protect your time in Quadrant 2?

## 4.2 Care for your self

*'Self-care is never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on the earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to our true selves and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch.'* Parker Palmer

Ultimately, as leaders we are the only tool we bring to our leadership. As the quote above says, we need to Invest in caring for ourselves if we are to bring our best to our leadership. The first element of caring for ourselves is knowing ourselves.

### Know yourself

As Socrates said, “an unexamined life is not worth living”. Knowing ourselves as leaders is not the same as being self-conscious. It is about being aware of our strengths and weaknesses, our tendencies and our personality traits. Leadership theory emphasises that

<sup>2</sup> See his classic work Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, 1989

effective leaders are highly self-aware (Kakabadse, 1999; Quinn, 2000; Adair, 2002). According to Dotlich and Noel, 'Leaders with self-awareness are more likely to move quickly and confidently and in different directions, without needing to be consistently right and in control' (1999, page 187). If we do not really know ourselves, we cannot act decisively and we lack the assuredness necessary to make a decision that runs counter to conventional wisdom. If we are aware of our weaknesses we are in a better position to manage them<sup>3</sup>. But if we are not aware of them they inadvertently manage us. We fall into the dangerous delusion that all our efforts are well-intended, that our use of power is always benign and the problem is always in those difficult people whom we are trying to lead (Palmer 2000).

People obviously often rise to leadership through success, but such outer success can often lead us to ignore our inner lives. "Thus we become dangerous, for our power grows even as our consciousness dims. We become increasingly blind and small and we visit our projections onto the world around us. The very factors that propel us into leadership precipitate our downfall and promote pain and discomfort in those we lead" (Parker Palmer, quoted by Kaplan 2002:195). This tendency is often compounded by followers, who may become increasingly reluctant to give us honest feedback as we rise in leadership. Many leaders no longer hear from anyone how they are really doing, but instead only receive deceptive deference and flattery.

### Care for your whole self

Being self-disciplined as leaders is not just about avoiding the pitfalls of overwork. We need the self-discipline to care for ourselves as this order in our lives creates the space for ideas, creativity, compassion, energy and fun. We are 'whole people' – physical, emotional and (some believe) spiritual beings. When we are tired and run down, our leadership suffers. We know well from any sporting arena that athletes rest. They look after themselves so that they bring their very best to the event. We should do the same. It is as important as re-charging the batteries on our phones.

#### *Physically*

We need to look after ourselves physically. For some it may be as simple as getting enough sleep, not trying to burn the candle at both ends. It may be about putting limits on where we read our emails. Is it really healthy to take our laptops and our work into bed? For others it might be about eating properly and drinking enough water. For others still it might be about stimulating the endorphins in our bodies by getting enough exercise. The health benefits of doing just 20 minutes exercise three times-a-week are well proven.

#### *Emotionally*

We have seen how potentially lonely it is as a leader. It is often a challenge for busy leaders to maintain and develop friendships outside of work. Yet emotionally we need the support of friends. We need to relax and have fun. As Dan Allender says, 'A leader with no close friends is a leader who is prone to swing between hiding and manipulating. A leader will serve an institution no better than she lives as a friend' (2008, page 114).

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<sup>3</sup> There are a number of formal questionnaire-type tools which may help you to understand more about your personality type and preferred leadership style. Myers-Briggs and Belbin team roles are two of the most popular in management. You could also fill in the free online questionnaire at <http://www.inspiredleadership.org.uk/index.php>

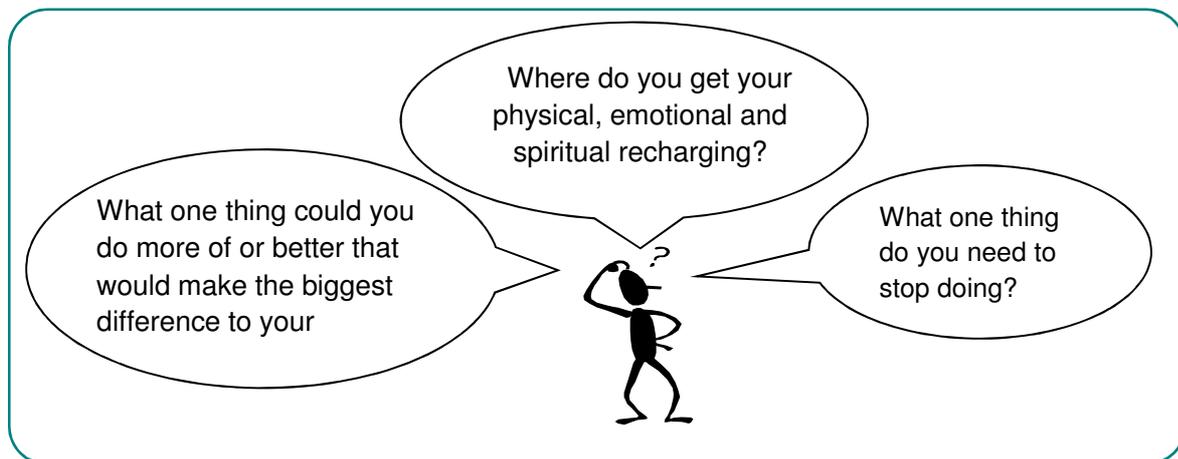
## *Spiritually*

Many people with faith believe in the value of also looking after your spiritual life. One CEO of a large UK faith-based organisation takes two hours 'off' every Friday lunchtime to stop, reflect and pray for the organisation he heads; another takes a day a month off on retreat to regain perspective on his work.

Yet such investment in the spiritual is not just for faith-based organisations<sup>4</sup>. In a recent article in the Financial Times, David Gelles wrote about General Mills, the huge US company behind Cheerios cereal and Haagen-Dazs ice cream explaining:

“Open the right door on a Tuesday morning and you might find a few dozen team leaders and executives meditating together on cushions, steeling themselves for the work week ahead. Enter a conference room a few hours later that afternoon and witness 50 senior executives standing on one leg in the tree pose as they practise yoga.”

In a similar vein, Peter Bregman wrote a piece in the Harvard Business Review blog network recently entitled: 'If you are too busy to meditate, read this'.



## 5. Summary:

*Why should anyone be led by you?*

This is a difficult question at the best of times. Ultimately all we bring to our leadership is ourselves. Do we bring a tired, frustrated, unfit, impatient, stressed self to our leadership? Or do we bring our very best?

The message of this short paper is that we should create space to lead by:

1. being strategic in our personal life – prioritising our commitments so we can devote quality time to our leadership
2. investing in caring for ourselves, so that we really do bring our best to our leadership

<sup>4</sup> <http://blogs.hbr.org/bregman/2012/10/if-youre-too-busy-to-meditate.html>

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