When Having a Bad Leader is Good: Processing a Negative Experience and Applying Leadership Lessons from the Kings

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Alan B. Howell

After years under the authority of a toxic church leader, a network of congregations in Mozambique finally escaped his influence. The author followed up on the negative leadership experience by interviewing local church leaders to glean their observations in order to create a culturally appropriate forum to process together as a group. Since the traditional leadership structure of the Makua-Metto people is that of kings and chiefs, the author shares how leadership lessons from the kings in Scripture can encourage these church leaders not to fall back into familiar, yet destructive, patterns.

I watched as my friend, Brad, cut a piece of metal with an electric saw. When it fell to the ground, his young son reached down to grab it, but thinking better of it, he quickly pulled his hand back instead. “Why did you change your mind about touching that piece of metal?” asked Brad knowingly.

“Oh, I remembered that a few days ago my older brother grabbed a piece just like that and it burned him,” his son answered.

“Good job,” Brad smiled, “that was very smart of you to be observant and learn from your brother’s mistake.”

That story of Brad and his son was the way I introduced a sensitive topic to the group of church leaders gathered together for our regular meeting. It had been over a year since their fellowship of churches had finally separated from a toxic leader that we’ll call Marcelino. Marcelino is a charismatic and talented Mozambican who transferred from his home culture in another province of the country to plant churches among the unreached Makua-Metto people. His large personality and evangelistic fervor attracted many people to him initially, but his character and leadership flaws severely limited his potential. Our mission team began working with him in 2004 and was often able to find ways around his issues, but eventually the problems spilled over in destructive ways. Marcelino tried to keep church authority to himself and steadfastly refused to recognize the leadership chosen by local congregations. In a relatively short span of time multiple reports of moral and financial indiscretions came to light. Additionally, when our team of foreign missionaries refused to continue working with him, he spread lies and attempted to get us expelled from the country.
In the year after officially separating from him, the church leadership enjoyed a fruitful season of growth, adding over twenty congregations and seeing hundreds of baptisms while still handling the distraction of Marcelino’s continued efforts to worm his way back into power. It was now time to process this experience as a group. I traveled around the province and met with eleven different Mozambican church leaders to collect their observations about this negative experience. I was convinced that, as in the story of Brad’s son above, being intentionally observant could help us avoid making the same mistakes as “our older brother.” This dynamic is seen in the biblical narrative as well. Could it be that one of the reasons King David became a great leader for God’s people was that during his time at court with Saul he was able to observe his predecessor’s disastrous style of leadership? Between dodging spears lobbed in his direction (1 Sam 18:10; 19:10), what if David was internalizing convictions about how to lead well?

“What did we learn?”: Processing the Interviews

I asked each of the church leaders: “What did you learn from the negative example of Marcelino?” All but one of the interviewees had an immediate answer to my question and had already begun to consider the positive lessons they were taking away from the negative experience. Afterward, I sifted through the interviews and presented the most common responses and observations about the dangers of Marcelino’s example to the larger group of church leaders in five different categories:

The Heart – the danger of pride in contrast with the blessings of humility

Marcelino would often use the phrase “I am” as part of his prideful rhetoric, constantly referring to his role and his achievements, but leaders noted that, in reality, this kind of title belongs to God alone. This “sickness of I am” made Marcelino trust in his own judgments of people more than the assessments of their local communities. He would often appoint someone as a local leader who was chosen not because he was a person of character, but because he was someone Marcelino could control. His pride also got in the way of really listening to others. Marcelino, as a couple of the church leaders put it, “only wanted other people around to stamp his ideas for approval.”

The Tongue – the danger of an untamed tongue in contrast with speaking the truth in love

Marcelino was known for preaching extremely long sermons (even by African standards!), but he would not practice what he preached. He was often sharp and severe in the way he criticized others. Almost all of the interviewees commented on how these were bad strategies for motivating people and proved to be much more destructive than constructive.

The Hand – the danger of being greedy with money in contrast with being generous and a good manager of church resources
Corruption is common in our area, and Marcelino would take advantage of his position to pad his own pocketbook. A number of the leaders commented on how, in contrast to the recommendations of Jesus, there were examples of when Marcelino gave money in order to be seen by others (cf. Matt 6:1–4).

**The Head – the danger of greedily holding onto power in contrast with sharing power with others**

It was observed that Marcelino was following the path of Diotrophes, who “loved to be first” (3 John 9–10). Instead of empowering qualified Makua-Metto people for leadership, he tended to set up a weak leader and then tear them down whenever they showed any initiative. One prime example referenced by many was a gathering in which Marcelino was confronted and asked when any local believers would be qualified to lead in his opinion, and he did not have an answer. It was then that they realized that he had no intention of relinquishing control. One interviewee commented that “according to Ephesians 3, it is Christ who gives gifts. It should not be the evangelist or pastor who passes them out and uses authority to label people. Our job as leaders is to help discern the gifts that people have and empower them to use those gifts effectively.”

**The Body – the difference between negative/destructive meetings and gatherings of the Body of Christ that are positive/constructive**

Under Marcelino’s leadership, problems and arguments broke out at nearly every church conference or meeting, but a common observation was that since separating from him, conflict-dominated gatherings had all but gone away. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned how they used to dread coming to church meetings, but now they enjoy participating because they can expect to leave encouraged. One common refrain was that Marcelino’s way of interacting with other people was the root of the problem: “He acted like a critical father instead of our brother in Christ.” They noted that Marcelino would not follow Jesus’s counsel in Matthew 18, and even after problems were “resolved” he was known for gossiping about the other party. Also, when he did not get his way in a conflict with the foreign missionaries, he took the issue to the government (against the recommendation of 1 Cor 6:1–8), which only served to make things worse.

Although reliving and remembering these negative experiences could potentially cause an emerging leader to despair, instead we found it helpful to create a forum for critical reflection on these events in order to consider ways to respond in a more faithful and healthy manner. After the leaders presented their own observations gleaned from this negative experience, I offered some suggestions as a way to jumpstart our processing together as a group.

**Rethinking What It Means to be a King**
When leaders are under stress, they tend to revert back to the patterns of behavior with which they are most familiar. Although a group of Christians may talk about the ideal kind of leadership they want to practice (servant leadership), when times are difficult there is a pull to go back to what they have actually seen and really experienced (in this case, Marcelino). In the Makua-Metto context the default, traditional leadership structure is a system of kings and chiefs. So, in an effort to help them “at least be good kings,” in a different setting, I led most of these church leaders through a series of lessons on leadership taken from Israel’s monarchy. The following are the king-sized texts and topics we explored:

- “Weak leaders let fear paralyze them” – In 1 Sam 13–14, there is a contrast between the way King Saul and his son, Jonathan, respond to conflict.
- “Weak leaders find it difficult to stand up for what is right and will often drive off talented people” – In 1 Sam 15, Saul takes the easy path and follows the will of the crowd instead of the will of the Lord. Then in 1 Sam 24 and 26, Saul ends up driving away David, a man of high capacity and high conviction. David, on the other hand, attracts and empowers talented people to his cause, and his willingness to stand up to his followers at the right times actually served to increase their loyalty to him (2 Sam 23).
- “Strong leaders are humble, listen well, and are quick to repent” – The story of stubborn Uzziah provides a helpful foil for David, who repented when the prophet Nathan confronted him (2 Chron 26 and 2 Sam 11–12).
- “Strong leaders focus on God’s legacy, not their own” – David’s gratefulness to God leads him to want to build the temple, but instead the Lord reaffirms his own promise to build up the “house of David” (2 Sam 7). Even though David is prohibited from building the temple, he worked to organize all the plans and materials for this massive endeavor, setting up his son for success (1 Chron 28-29). Surprisingly, even though David was the one who did so much to provide for Israel’s center of worship, the building was eventually known as the “Temple of Solomon.” It is easy to imagine, is it not, that this label would not have bothered David in the least? His focus on God’s legacy is a powerful reminder of the true orientation of godly leadership.
- “Leading God’s people today as elders and shepherds” – While the examples of the kings can certainly be instructive, especially in Makua-Metto culture, it is important to remember that there is only one true king, and those who lead Christ’s followers have a different set of titles and roles. John 10, Acts 20, and the Pastoral Epistles were texts that helped shift the discussion from kings and chiefs to elders and shepherds.
The studies of the kings were an attempt to take seriously the tendency to fall back on familiar patterns. They helped reinterpret and reformat the culturally given perspective on what it means to be a king, reshaping it in ways that fit the call to godly leadership in Scripture.

**Two Competing Pyramids**

Since servant leadership is so difficult to teach in this context, our forum used two leadership diagrams to help us explore and contrast the negative example of Marcelino. The first picture was a leadership pyramid made with a smug stick figure standing at the top. Stacked below him were rows and rows of sad and frustrated faces. We discussed how even though the leader was clearly at the top, he did not feel secure. He was restlessly looking over his shoulder, worried that someone would come and steal his position and authority. Perry Shaw notes that as “long as leadership is perceived in terms of power and status, the fear of training the next generation to leadership will persist, lest ‘my’ position and status is taken by another. It takes a servant attitude to be willing not merely to train leaders for future replacement of my own ministry, but to rejoice when another is able more effectively now to take my position of leadership and do my job.”

We held that picture of leadership in contrast with an upside-down pyramid where the leader was both sweating (leading is still hard work) and smiling (leading this way brings more joy) as he holds up the people in his charge. This leader welcomed other co-leaders to work together in bearing the weight of the congregation. As Shaw observes, “the scriptural model is not one of studious oversight and control, but one in which those in leadership first delegate to those who are gifted and then seek to empower them to do the tasks for which God has gifted them—and all for the good of the whole body of Christ.”

**Two Challenging Promises**

Our group of Makua-Metto church leaders and missionaries (both Mozambican and American) also made two mutual promises. The first was a commitment to step in and correct each other when any of us returned to the methods we had seen in the life and ministry of Marcelino. The second promise was for each of us to cultivate a humble heart. We recognized that even if we were successful in sidestepping all of the errors we had seen in Marcelino, there would still be different ways that we would fail as leaders in the future. So, the takeaway was not that if we avoid Marcelino’s failures we will be perfect leaders but instead that being humble and having open ears for each other’s counsel not only helps us learn from Marcelino’s mistakes but also sets us up to learn from our own failures in the future.

**Observations on the Missionary’s Role in Processing a Negative Leadership Experience**

Reflecting on the interviews and the group discussion, I have come to recognize how my status as an informed foreigner played a helpful part in processing the “Marcelino experience.” Because of Makua-Metto cultural values and expectations, it would have been
difficult for one of the Mozambican church leaders to spearhead this kind of discussion. As a resident alien, I was able to play dumb and break the taboos, asking questions that opened a release valve for group processing in a way that would not cause blame or shame to fall on any of them. Also, since I, too, had been deeply hurt by Marcelino, I had the necessary credibility to initiate and participate in the discussion.

A second observation was that in preparing for this forum, when I searched for resources and examples of those who have collectively processed a negative church leadership experience, I was surprised by the lack of published materials. One of my American teammates observed that being able to process such a traumatic experience communally is likely uncommon because it is rare for a group to endure such a destructive leader without splintering apart. It is unfortunate that resources for these situations are equally scarce. Our team found that creating a forum to process the negative leadership experience provided fertile ground and ample material for the task of leadership formation. This kind of processing of a real life case study could be especially helpful for those working cross-culturally.

Thirdly, it is important to remember that leadership expectations are profoundly influenced by culture. One’s background shapes a “preference for vertical or horizontal patterns of power, for autocracy or democracy.” It has been a challenge to ensure that the leadership patterns of my home culture and the church authority structure we share with our Mozambican brothers and sisters intersect in a healthy way with the leadership expectations among the Makua-Metto people. Even though it is primarily geared towards a Western audience, Don Armour and Michael Browning’s book *Systems-Sensitive Leadership* has personally been an indispensable resource for interpreting, appreciating, and engaging different social expectations for leaders.

**Conclusion**

A Christian leader is “a servant who uses his or her credibility and capacities to influence people in a particular context to pursue their God given direction.” Although the finer points of how that type of leadership appears in a given context may vary, certainly the broader strokes of that picture or pattern of Christlike leadership will be consistent across the globe. Roger Mitchell has coined the term *kenarchy*, a word formed from the Greek words *keno* (empty) and *arche* (power or rule), which “signifies the emptying out of power on behalf of others in contrast with exercising power over others.” Kenarchy, then, “is the ‘new politics’ of love that Jesus introduces with a kingdom made up of servants who renounce power over others.”

In Jesus’s own day, there was a plethora of negative leadership examples. The leadership style exhibited in his ministry provided a positive contrast to the destructive practices of both the Jews and the Romans. His kingship (or kenarchy) displayed a different kind of authority, one that did not conform to the patterns of our world but instead focused on blessing and empowering others. Christ’s leadership style veered away from the mistakes of the human leaders of his day and cleared the path of servant leadership for us to follow.
Our forum for processing a negative leadership experience, and seeing how having a bad leader can be good, was an important step in recognizing how God is redeeming a broken situation in the Makua-Metto church. It has been helpful in encouraging the churches in our part of Mozambique to learn from the mistakes of their “older brother,” Marcelino, as well as in pointing all of us toward the example of our older brother (Heb 2:10–11) and king, Jesus, whose positive example calls us to live and lead well.

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1 The popular expression “the goat eats where it is tethered” is commonly attributed to former Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano and is often mentioned to explain the country’s culture of corruption, prevalent in both public and private institutions.

2 My thanks to Evertt W. Huffard for this important observation.


4 Ibid., 129.

5 My thanks to Jeremy Smith for this keen insight.

6 Shaw, 122.

7 Don Armour and Michael Browning, Systems-Sensitive Leadership: Empowering Diversity without Polarizing the Church, 2nd ed. (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2000).

