

Constant Learning is a Must for Leaders

You might think that, after all these years, I'd know more about leadership than I do. But, when I attended Dr. Mark Rutland's National Institute on Christian Leadership a couple of years ago, I found it very beneficial in developing my own leadership skills.

Not only is Dr. Rutland a great storyteller and very entertaining, but he also helped me to connect the dots in a way that helped me to solve some huge issues I faced in our organization. The course works at a high level—so much so that for those who choose to continue their education toward a seminary degree, it counts for the first of three years of that degree. It's been so well received that it's been expanded to include duplicate courses in Dallas and Atlanta.

The first of the three sessions of NICL is being hosted in our Charisma Media headquarters on Feb. 3-5. There is still time to register. The course helped me immensely and many others who have also become raging fans.

There are few more savvy about the concept of leadership than Dr. Rutland. After serving as senior pastor at Calvary Assembly Church in Winter Park, Fla., he took over as president of Southeastern University in Lakeland, Fla., and brought success to an institution that was struggling financially. He also served as the third president of Oral Roberts University from 2009 to 2013.

So I was delighted when I came across this blog on leadership by Dr. Rutland in which he mentions the NICL, an organization he founded. You will be blessed when you read it and even more blessed if you sign up for the four NICL sessions on leadership.

Decision Making: From Referee to CEO

Dr. Mark Rutland

One way of stating the leader/manager's job description is actually "senior decision maker." I think that among the biggest and most disconcerting of all the surprises that I had in moving, lo these many years ago, into the senior executive role was the constant barrage of decisions that demanded an answer:

What do you want to do about ... ? When should we ... ? How do you want ... ?

Volley after volley of questions, small and consequential, lobbed into my lap like mortars, became at times excruciatingly oppressive. This was not entirely new to me. I had first experienced some of the challenges of decision making as a leader in sports, first as a player, then as a coach and finally, and most illuminating of all, as a referee.

I learned some great lessons in that arena. First, there is rapid analysis and high-speed decision-making. When you crouch down in that huddle and those other guys look to you to call a play, getting lots of feedback and taking time for research is not an option. Just call something. Make the best decision you can and go for it. That was my job as a quarterback then. Few if any plays were sent in from the bench in those days and the exotic hand signals so widely employed nowadays had not yet become the fashion. It was largely on the quarterback. I was often the youngest and smallest guy in the huddle. I had to think quickly. What is the situation? What is the best thing to do? Call the play and run it. In many ways that experience was a great advantage in later situations of leadership.

As a basketball referee, that instant analysis-response mechanism came in handy. Watch what is happening, decide what to call and blow the whistle. It's simple, hard, fast and very

public. The stands were filled with kibitzers all certain they could see better from the bleachers than you could right down on the court. And, half of them were angry at you all the time. Again, it's great preparation for later leadership.

As I moved from referee to executive, I discovered some of those very skills, though sometimes still useful, were just as often counterproductive. I found I needed to approach decision making as a CEO with a somewhat different mindset. Here are few of the tools I found useful as an executive decision maker.

1. Training my staff to discern which decisions can appropriately be made at their level without my stamp on it.

This is a bit of a dance and the process may not always be smooth. I do know this. The executive who wants an effective executive staff has to have a pretty high tolerance for some mistakes in the learning process. After a mix up, you teach. Look, I don't need you to buy a surplus aircraft carrier without my approval. Then again, hey, I don't want you to call me about paper clips. PLEASE! Just buy them. Some objective benchmarks will help, such as dollar thresholds, PO's, etc., but hiring people with good judgment and empowering them to make decisions is even more important.

2. Learning to ask questions. You do not have to be the smartest guy on your leadership team. In fact, if you are, you probably haven't hired "up" as you should have. On the other hand you have to know how to ask, whom to ask, and when to ask. Get the right people in the room. Keep pressing for a better understanding. What else do I need to know? Who has a different view on this? Is there something I'm not thinking of? These are valuable questions and ones that the true servant-leader can ask without embarrassment. The arrogant and insecure leader, terrified that anyone in the room might see that he doesn't know everything, will discover too late that they knew it all along.

3. Taking responsibility. When it comes right to the moment of the decision, as the kids say, “Ok, you de man” (or woman as the case may be). Information gathered, team analysis made, questions asked—all that—still at the end somebody calls the play. That’s you, the executive decision-maker. Approach the moment with some humility. Tell your team that if you’re wrong you will admit it and take the blame. If you are right you will pass praise along to them. It’s ok for you to be wrong occasionally. Everybody knows you’re not infallible. They mostly want to know you know that. They also want to know you will be loyal to them and share the spotlight when the applause starts.

4. Cultivating a thick hide. This is the place where my years as a referee helped the most. There is no decision, absolutely no decision that will be universally endorsed by all your various constituencies. If you cannot stand the harsh criticism of uninformed armchair quarterbacks, stay out of executive leadership. As a referee I had to make instant decisions while being watched by huge, angry crowds and stand by them while mockery and derision rained down from the stands. You will never come to the place where none of it ever hurts. You can cultivate a hide thick enough to endure most of it with a sense of humor.

After I left an institution where we enjoyed no small success, a mid-level employee was promoted by my successor. He was quoted in the newspaper as saying something to the effect of, “It’s nice to be on team that makes decisions together. Rutland didn’t ask; he just made the decisions on his own.” That really hurt, at first. Then I realized, that’s how it felt to him. I did ask, of course. I just didn’t ask him. I had a very effective executive team that made quality decisions together for years. He just was not a part of it. Oh, well, you gotta laugh. What would be the use in defending against such an accusation? None.

For a much more exhaustive treatment of decision making,

including risk analysis, the problem of over-securing, and many other aspects of this challenging executive discipline, please consider joining me for the National Institute of Christian Leadership in 2014. For information and to register please visit .

Here you will find a wealth of information on all of our venues in 2014, everything pertaining to costs, scholarship opportunities and dates. You can also call Daniel Prince at with any and all questions. Don't miss your chance to register today.