

Do Successful Leaders Need Adversity?

By: Al Ells

Reflect for a moment. Have you heard these sayings before?

"Stay the Course"

"When the going gets tough the tough get going"

"If at first you don't succeed, try and try again!"

"Winners never quit and quitters never win."

I just heard a great sermon from my pastor Cal Jernigan on *"You can't quit your way to faithfulness."* In it he explained that we've become a culture of quitters when the going gets tough. We quit relationships, jobs, churches and even God. Yet the scripture is clear in Luke 11 that it costs to be a disciple of Christ and we can't quit when adversity and challenge come our way.

I believe this is especially true with leaders. God wants to work on us so that He can work through us. This means, in part, that He wants our path to be difficult at times in order for us to become who we need to be to accomplish what we need to do. As Cal shared, He often does this through resistance training. Facing failure, adversity and crisis can be exactly what a leader needs.

Self-Awareness

The key to surviving and thriving in ministry often rests in increasing our self-awareness and growing from it. The increased self-awareness that enduring adversity can bring, offers us a glimpse into deeper inner characteristics that we normally would not recognize. Tribulation tends to reveal deeper character traits that need refinement and change. When we quit growing, when we give in give up and resist change, we diminish our leadership potential. We must endure the difficulties and not quit in order to reap the reward. I learned through a season of adversity that I had blind spots. I had been too proud and needed to deal with insecurities that fed my pride. My dark storm also seriously affected Susan. She didn't know how to respond and went into survival mode, depressed and disconnected from me. On a deeper level she blamed me for not protecting us from the onslaught. Though very hurtful, her separation was a gift. I learned to be OK even when she wasn't there for me. With a history of codependency (see my book [One-Way Relationships: When You Love them More than they Love You](#)), I was too dependent upon her. The distance made me face my inner fears of not being loved and find my security in Christ.

All of us have parts of ourselves that are immature, incomplete or not yet perfected. It is these parts of ourselves that we don't see since we can't fully observe ourselves. It took a major crisis for Brian Houston, the renowned pastor of Hillsong Church, to grow and change. Brian did not cause the crisis, it was his Father who had molested children. However, he still learned from that trial. He found out he needed to challenge and overcome inner fears and insecurities that caused him to be too driven. He learned how to set appropriate boundaries and pace himself.

Abraham Lincoln gained a "*profound self-awareness that enabled him to find ways to alleviate sadness and stress,*" writes biographer Doris Kerns Goodwin. The many failures and pain of his earlier life helped him develop inner resilience and grit. Lincoln needed this to have the reserves to deal with the monumental challenges he faced during the Civil War. I also developed more grit because of my adversity. Angela Duckworth, psychologist, defines grit as "*passion and perseverance over the long haul.*" I developed the capacity to put one foot in front of the other, and keep on doing what was needed for my wife, my staff, my clients, and me - no matter how difficult. I didn't give up or give in. Learning grit can only be developed through difficulty. It comes from tenacity and perseverance through adversity and difficulty.

Re-Frame

A necessary insight to growth is the ability to re-frame failure and adversity as potential growth. If we don't learn from trials and tribulations we may have suffered needlessly. We need to look for the silver lining in the storm clouds. We need to capture what God is showing us about ourselves as well as others.

I believe if you partner with God, He will cause you to think...and learn...and change. God is not only the God of healing and comfort, but also the God of challenge, purpose and growth. He is always conforming us to the image of His Son. He is consistently molding us to be more of who we need to be so that His life and purposes can be lived in and through us. That is why learning how to face and deal with adversity is so important and learning from hard times is absolutely essential. Adversity is a pathway to refinement (James 1: 2-4; Rom. 5:3-5; Heb.12:5-6). Even if I am not guilty of serious wrongdoing, God still has plenty for me to learn. I may have behaviors and attitudes that need changing, skills to learn, and understandings to sharpen. When in crisis the key question for a leader to ask is: If the whole purpose of the crisis is to change something in me, or teach me a lesson, what would it be? I believe that leaders who survive and thrive learn and grow from adversity, crisis and challenge. They don't quit!

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