



I have enjoyed reading “How to plant a walnut tree” by Trevor Waldock. It shares the idea of planting a tree that will produce fruit for the coming generation. The following letter is inspired by Trevor’s book and a number of thoughts are taken from it.

Our Journey: There are points along our journey of life where we need to reflect, take a breath and think about our life and options. It often begins around university age when we think about the topic we want to study and the career we would like to start. Ten years later when we are in our thirties, life gets busier, as we gain more responsibility in our job roles, as well as often see the developing of a family on the home front. Sometimes it’s here we have a mid-life crisis, and if we are wise, we take some time to assess where we are at. Some choose to press on in what they know, others branch out into something completely different. As we enter our late 40’s or 50’s, we can go in a number of directions: 1. We can continue to function in our jobs, being mildly bored until we retire and then move into a leisure mode. 2. We can plateau and stay in our comfort zone where we live out our days. Or 3. We can continue to push ahead and seek the highest level we can - that is until we hit the glass ceiling where we can go no further. These latter individuals are good leaders but find there’s nowhere to go for continued fulfillment. They need to move on to make room for others to grow but hit the glass ceiling, stay in their roles and live with an inner frustration.

So is leadership a glass ceiling? What lies beyond leadership? Well these are the sixty four thousand dollar questions and what we want to discover.

Why the talk of elders?: We have become a multi-generational mission with leaders working together from at least 6 decades. There comes a time in the leadership journey when leaders need to step out of line-leadership roles into more influence roles. In our YWAM history to date, there have been no officially recognised ‘influence roles’ to move into. This has led to leaders being hesitant to step out of their line roles for fear of losing relationship and influence. Then, when a leader stays too long in a role, they create a vacuum of leadership behind them, as often, potential leaders move on when they see no possible growth path. This initially makes it difficult to recruit a successor, as the leadership bar has now become too high. It becomes hard for the new recruit to step up and embrace the role, as the shoes they have to wear have become too big. It’s almost a set up for failure.

The challenge of words: The words we choose to describe and clarify concepts can tend to be loaded, and the word ‘elder’ is not immune. For many, elder translates as an older, wiser, often male leader, who is in authority in the church, is respected and who makes the final decisions with other elders. I grew up in a Brethren church where the elders were the leaders and formed a team which they called “the oversight”. Reporting to the oversight were the deacons, who managed practical areas in the church. We first read of Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in the churches in Acts 14. These elders were the leaders and chief decision makers. Elders are also known in groups like the Jehovah’s witnesses or Mormons as men of authority in their churches.

However when we as YWAM use the term “elder”, we are meaning something a little different and it’s important to understand what this difference is.

The difference of line-leaders & elders:

Line-leader: Every team, base, national or ministry leader has responsibility for three things – firstly, to see the vision or task they are called to fulfilled through wise decision making and implementation; secondly, to bring together a team that functions in synergy and accountability; and thirdly, to care for the individuals involved in their ministry.

Elder: Every ministry and individual would do well to have healthy relationships with older, wiser, resourceful, prayerful “grandparents” who have gained a spiritual authority from their breadth of leadership, experience and lessons learned. (This is an influence-based authority not overriding that of the ‘parents’)

Leadership has a lot of ego attached to it. Leadership is about accomplishing goals, developing the organisation and building the ministry. With all these activities comes a certain amount of glory attached to a job well done. Eldership is about developing and investing in others and then supporting them in their reach towards their potential. These kind of roles are helpful in killing off the residue of ego from leadership roles!

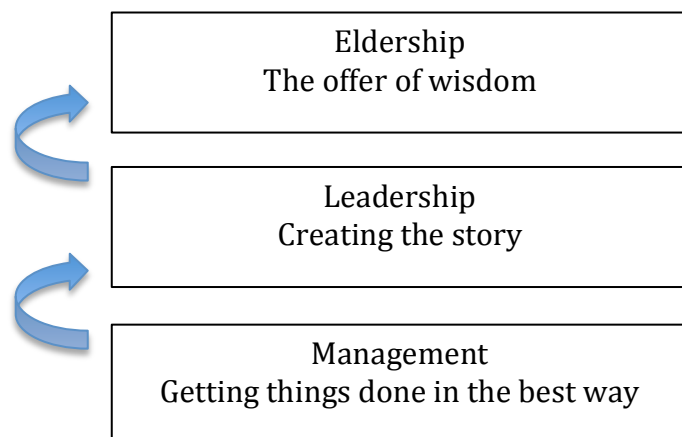
Leadership is about creating a story that affects the thoughts, feelings and actions of other individuals. Elders offer wisdom so that the story ends up being the best possible story.

The Greek language helps us to see this difference clearly. The language has an active voice – meaning you are doing something; a passive voice – meaning you don't do anything but are waiting for someone else; and a middle voice – where you are actively responding to someone else's action. The active voice speaks of leadership and the middle voice speaks of eldership.

An elder can be a line-leader and vice versa but they need to be aware of which hat they have on, in any given situation. It is also difficult for followers when the line-leader in a location also acts as an elder! It is important to note that one doesn't climb the leadership ladder into eldership but are recognised for a role as an elder.

A model of the differences:

It should be noted that this model doesn't follow that of many cultures where the elders of a tribe or town have become untouchables, where respect for elders means you can't challenge them – this is another form of positional power.



The interesting thing in this model, is that you need good leadership to bring about eldership and to maintain respect for it. Leadership is the pivotal point, being served by managers on the one hand and elders on the other.

Becoming an elder: To become an elder you don't have to jump through a bunch of hoops or attend a course. It is a phase of life you have entered, where you have gained wisdom, invest in and release the younger generation, carry the YWAM DNA (or organisation or church you

are with) in your heart, actively serve, train, impart wisdom and pray for individuals, team and the ministry in general. Elders are forged through the experiences of life. They have suffered and learned character, intimacy and depth of relationship.

Being an elder isn't necessarily a full time role and many will be involved in specific ministries where their passion lies. For example, an international leader of a ministry can be an elder at a local level; a base leader could be an elder at a broader level.

Elders teach young and less mature leaders about values and principles that they have lived through and thought about deeply in order to pass on. Elders understand that a value or principle is a compass needle within them that tells them the truth when nothing is clear. They know the difference between aspirational values: – things I think are great but haven't translated into my behaviour, and true values: – things I believe and do something with. For example one organisation had feedback from a consultant that one of their values was workaholism! They didn't like the feedback but when they looked at the rate of breakdown of health, working hours and relational problems they knew it was true. (I wonder what the consultant would say to YWAM?)

How do you spot an elder? An elder is someone with integrity who can be trusted and respected. They understand themselves having become self-aware and can therefore understand others because of their strength as great listeners. They are life-long learners and are continually developing their knowledge and gaining wisdom. They are spiritual parents who give perspective and the wisdom of years and help their mentorees see today's issues on a much broader canvas. They are mentors and take every opportunity of passing on principles and personal examples from their full experience. (of course not all mentors are elders!) They love to function in plurality alongside other elders.

A key value of an elder is being 'relational.' If a line leader delegates his or her role and wants to become an influence leader or elder, they have to remember this new role will function on the basis of relationship. If people don't choose to listen to them, they have nothing to offer. Eldership can't be forced on people. Some teams and bases won't have elders as they haven't developed to that point yet. It's not a value statement – one team being better because they have elders attached! We want to see the multiplication of elders but it can't be legislated or structured and made into formulas. The bottom line is; elders aren't elected but recognised. As they function in their life and ministry, touching people on route, others see and understand and say, "ah there goes an elder."

Responsibilities of an elder: These may include passing on expertise and experience in leadership, coming alongside in coaching, mentoring, counselling, mediating, consulting, advising, assisting, training and teaching, praying for leaders and staff, being a pastoral and prophetic watchman, guarding the values of YWAM or the organisation and sharing the corporate story.

The big question though is, "Am I prepared to aspire to something where I have a role of influence that is often hidden?" That means it has no ego attached!

Ministry leaders engaging with elders: There are no set processes and formulas as I have said and I hope there never will be, as this is one thing that makes me nervous. It seems it's part of human nature to imitate and so any new structure, format or way of leading is often copied around the world into our own situation. We haven't been this way before, so I would encourage us all to develop elderships slowly and seek the Lord in our own context for the right approach.

However, I do encourage you to seek out and recognise elders in your midst who fulfil the criteria and even now are functioning in this role. Note that I didn't say give elders a title but rather establish an eldership role. We aren't looking for Elder A and Elder B. It's not a title we will give but rather a function of eldering to recognise in our midst. Be '*intentionally inclusive*' of elders in your community life, leadership teams, and events taking place. Call on their wisdom and resources and make room for them to invest relationally in the life of individuals and the ministry.

For example, a leadership team may invite elders into their meetings once a month for a more strategic, prayer oriented focus. Elders may bring a mentoring focus and be available for training up ministry leaders, have a more pastoral role with a team or be available for mediation in a conflict situation. As an eldership grows they may come together to pray and seek the Lord for the ministry. We expect eldership networks to emerge from the grassroots up over these coming years.

My experience: For Rite and I, moving to Spain and opening a leadership retreat centre has opened up a way to offer eldership. We have become leaders at large, to 'bring wisdom and perspective' to people. We don't come with a set agenda and are not biased towards any particular base, nation or focus, but speak into hundreds of lives throughout the year in an in-depth way, through vulnerability, humility and learning together. We don't relate out of position but out of learned experience. We are given relational and spiritual respect and asked to speak into their lives and leadership. There's no force, no on-going expectation, no reporting relationships, just a listening ear to understand and a space for them to process and learn. What a joy!

I still have leadership hats but to those coming to the retreat centre it's my eldership hat they are looking for. This is convergence – living life to the full, investing in others, continually learning more and passing it along. I still have struggles, burdens, grieve and experience pressures but convergence is the phase of life where gifts, skills and experience are matching the role and opportunity. Generally elders are in this phase of convergence when they are truly eldering. It's a phase where they have reached their potential and now have the joy of sharing out of the abundance they have experienced.

My vision for the leadership development course (LDC) has been for regional leadership to form eldership like teams that minister to the lives of the leaders attending. The main leaders are often in convergence themselves and are ready to make investment in others a major focus of their life and ministry.

Just as we have aspired to leadership, the challenge is for us to aspire to eldership and move beyond the glass ceiling! As a final word, check out this website and read about the global elders. You will find it very encouraging. <http://www.theelders.org>

Until next month

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