

The First Management Consultant – JETHRO?

As part of my consulting work with transitioning organizations, I am often led to growing churches. Similar to other organizations, they also struggle with how their management or governance process needs to evolve as their church grows. Yet, these leaders have a concern that is brought to my attention more often than I care to remember. “We are a church, not a business.” Reminding me there is a difference. “We don’t want to impose *business* practices on our church.”

Though I served on the board of our growing church for almost a decade, and have since advised numerous church leadership teams, my business background prompts their reminder. In other words, don’t promote “business” models and practices to how they manage their church.

Their hearts are in the right place. The church is definitely *not* a business, (though larger churches do have major operations and budgets with millions of dollars to manage). But, they sometimes have a jaded perspective of organization development and current leadership practices. In their minds, these are equated to “business” practices, not church or simply *organizational* practices. Time to turn that notion on its head!

Who Learned From Who?

I almost always use the term “organization” whether referring to a small business, large corporation, church, or other nonprofit. They certainly all have very different missions. Yet there is one common denominator. People. A major challenge with any type of growing organization, is managing the growing number of people. Throughout history we’ve learned important, practical lessons on how to effectively lead people. But, are growing churches being influenced by business on how to manage - or did business originally learn from the church?

Many are familiar with Moses of the Bible. (If nothing else we’ve seen Charlton Heston as Moses in *The Ten Commandments* movie) We are less familiar with someone named Jethro – who happens to be Moses’ father-in-law. Given Jethro’s sage advice to Moses on how to better execute his leadership responsibilities, Jethro is often considered the first management consultant. (Exodus 18:13-24)

At the time, Moses served as the judge or leader of Israel. That meant, he was ultimately responsible (to God, none the less!) for the people of Israel. The narrative describes how the people, “stood around him from morning till evening” as he made all the decisions and helped with every dispute. Why did he do this? Because he was the assigned leader who was ultimately

responsible for the people and ensuring that God's will prevailed. Yet like many leaders from all types of organizations, he believed being accountable meant *personally* having to make all the decisions. But it was not going well.

In Jim Collins' famous book, *Good To Great*, he urges leaders to "Confront the Brutal Facts." This is frequently a primary contribution from an outside consultant, to *ask the dumb questions and state the obvious*. Why? Over time, organizational leaders tend to become "part of the system." This means they may become less observant to things that seem obvious to an outsider. Or, they may simply ignore a particular issue, because it's so difficult to change. Sometimes, they just don't want to change a certain process or practice, because they created it. One of the benefits of a consultant is simply an outsider looking in with a fresh perspective.

As that outsider, it was apparent to Jethro that Moses was burning out, and the people were getting frustrated. So he asks the obvious question: "*What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?*" Jethro is someone who had very practical experience overseeing large numbers of people, and knows there's a better way. Moses, like most leaders, replies from his perspective and sense of responsibility. "*Because the people come to me...whenever they have a dispute...I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws.*" He was assigned the leadership role, and he was the only one with the knowledge to perform in that role. (A very frequent perspective from founders/leaders of any type of organization)

Jethro then shifts to consultant mode, offering insights from his experience. "*What you are doing is not good.*" Then, with a jolt of reality he states the brutal facts. "*You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.*" More consultant than coach, Jethro then candidly offers his perspective. "*Listen now to me and I will give you some advice...*" But first, he affirms Moses' role as the leader, and yes, he remains ultimately responsible. Then Jethro enlightens Moses with the simple fact that just because he is responsible does *not* mean he personally has to do everything himself. He needs a leadership team, and he should, "*Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform.*" Teach and show others how to leader – THAT is how Moses should effectively fulfill his responsibilities.

Jethro tells Moses he doesn't have to carry this burden himself – in fact, that isn't good for the people or him. In his wisdom, Jethro also knew that "who" Moses would choose on his leadership team was just as important as the structure he would implement. Jethro instructed Moses to:

- Select *capable* men from all the people
- Each should fear God, be trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain
- Teach them the decrees/laws, and show them how to perform their duties
- Appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens
- Have them serve as judges/leaders for all the people for most issues
- Bring only the most difficult issues/decisions to Moses

Jethro offers practical management advice that today we would call delegation, organizational structure, and a hierarchical chain of command. It was also critical that Moses ensured the

leadership team had shared values. But before letting them loose, he was to teach them in the laws and in their duties, so they would perform effectively. Jethro then tells Moses of the benefits of this process. *“That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you...you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.”*

In Summary

This narrative in Exodus ends with my favorite sentence: **“Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said.”** The person chosen by God to lead the people *listened to practical advice* from an experienced organizational leader on how to better execute his leadership responsibilities...and he *did* it.

The advice from Jethro, considered by many as the first management consultant, remains applicable to growing organizations today:

- Leaders *remain* ultimately responsible for the organization – the buck stops here!
- As their organization grows, they need to share the load with a leadership team (otherwise, it will “not be good” for you or your people).
- The selection process is critical – choosing capable people who share in the values and vision of the organization
- Training is essential before delegating leadership responsibilities
- Structure is a “tool” that must evolve as the organization grows
- Major, mission-critical issues should still come directly to the top

This ancient event is simply an example of a leader heeding practical counsel from someone with experience in organizational management. These are not “business” practices...or church practices. They are a sample of wise organizational practices, processes and tools for managing a growing number of people – no matter what type of organization.

Michael Wilkes & Company specializes in management consulting and leadership team development for closely-held businesses, churches, and nonprofit organizations challenged by the necessary leadership transitions due to growth or strategic change. For further information: www.michaelwilkesco.com