

# Journal of Strategic Management



**ISSN Online: 2616-8472**



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Peer Reviewed Journals & books

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**ISSN: 2616-8472**

# Nehemiah the Governor: An Exemplary Strategic Leader

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*How to cite this article:* Muthuku, M. (2020). Nehemiah the Governor: An Exemplary Strategic Leader, *Journal of Strategic Management*, 4(1), 67-77.

## Abstract

Nehemiah is renowned as one of the greatest strategic leaders of old. Faced with political opposition, enemies threatening to attack and a handful of soldiers to fight against them, Nehemiah had to use various strategies in order to win the battle ahead of him as well as rebuild and secure the great city of Jerusalem. Upon receiving a blessing from the King, Nehemiah set out to rebuild the great walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem (Holy Bible, 2018). Against all odds, holding his sword with one hand and using the other to work, Nehemiah led his troops to accomplish the work and got the wall up and standing in a matter of days. To achieve this great success, Nehemiah engaged various leadership strategies which included prayer, providing vision and foresight, adaptability, perseverance and leveraging on power and influence. This paper reviews the strategies Nehemiah employed so as to lead his team, the children of Israel to successfully rebuild the wall and repair Jerusalem's gates as recorded in the Holy Bible (Nehemiah 1-5). Nehemiah's leadership in light of strategic leadership schools as well as application of his leadership approaches to today's 21<sup>st</sup> century organization are also highlighted.

**Keywords:** *Strategy, Strategic leadership & Nehemiah*

## **Strategic Leadership**

Strategic leadership encompasses the manner in which individuals and teams think, act and influence other people in such a way that promotes sustainable competitive advantage for the organization (Hughes & Beatty, 2005). One of the key roles of a strategic leader is to ensure that their organization keeps on thriving for the long term, and that that success is sustainable (Hughes & Beatty, 2005). Strategy has to do with putting an organization at a point of competitive advantage which includes choices about what activities to undertake, which markets to participate in, what services and products to offer that market as well as decisions and choices on allocation of the limited organizational resources.

According to Northouse (2016), leadership is defined as a “process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). It is evident from this definition that leadership is a process and not a one-time event, it is a progression which is transactional (Northouse, 2016) in nature with both parties, i.e. the leader and the followers being affected by this transactional relationship. Effective leadership involves having a positive impact and influence to the leader’s followers, which in turn motivates the followers to be effective in their work and thus lead to greater productivity for the organization. Strategic leaders scan inwardly and keep abreast of their organization’s internal strengths and weaknesses, and they also keep on evaluating their external environment for any threats and opportunities so that they can work out a competitive and sustainable strategic intent to carry the organization to the future (Daft, 2010). They regularly take stock of the resources they have in order to deploy them in an effective manner to achieve efficiency and best results with those limited resources.

In defining the attributes of strategic leadership, Hughes and Beatty (2005) posit that strategic leadership is different from the other forms of leadership in subtle ways in that strategic leadership is employed when the leader makes decisions which have strategic implications for the organization. The effects of those decisions may be felt over long term periods and may also bring key organizational changes. Some of the attributes of a strategic leader include strategic thinking, strategic acting, having a strategic influence, creating strategic teams to work with and making strategy a learning process in the organization one is in charge of.

### **Nehemiah the Strategist**

Nehemiah, as recorded in the Holy Bible (Nehemiah 1-5), is viewed as one of the great strategic leaders of old, including among others Moses, Joshua and Paul. Nehemiah was a governor who was tasked by God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Maciariello, 2003) during the second Temple period. In a record of fifty-two days only, Nehemiah after defying enemies from all sides including the Samaritans, the Ammonites, the Arabs and the Philistines set to work with his team and rebuilt the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem. To achieve this great success, Nehemiah had to put in place strategic approaches as discussed below to get the work done in a commendable short period of time. Nehemiah had to assess the situation he was facing, he secured the needed resources and then established his team including leaders and distributed the various assignments among the people.

Demonstrating fearlessness and engaging in prior preparation, Nehemiah committed in fervent prayer to the Lord his God, just so that he could find favour with the King Artaxerxes to allow him to return to his ancestral land and rebuild it. Nehemiah knew where his allegiance was and where the source of his direction, power and success came from thus on various occasions he consulted and relied on God through prayer. Hughes and Beatty (2005) postulate that organizational strategy is a learning process which includes assessment of the present situation and collecting information about an individual or organization's competitive advantage. Although Nehemiah was a bit nervous in the beginning about approaching King Artaxerxes, he however engaged strategic thinking and when the king accorded him an opportunity to present his case, he quickly consulted God once more before he could respond to the King. A strategic leader needs to always scan their environment and prepare themselves on the tactical methods and decisions they would take. When Nehemiah was presented with an opportunity to state his case to the King, he did not shy away neither was he intimidated to make his huge request of going back to rebuild his ancestral city. Nehemiah also anticipated a harsh and unwelcome mood from his fellow governors while he transited through their land. To counter this, Governor Nehemiah went on and further requested the King to grant him letters in order to ensure his safe and free movement back to Judah. The King granted him this favour too and Nehemiah was issued with the required documents.

*Setting the mission, vision, goals and objectives* is another organizational strategy attributed to the Governor (Hughes & Beatty, 2005). Being a strategic leader, Nehemiah set out the mission of his journey, which was essentially to go back to his ancestral land and rebuild the city of Jerusalem that lay in ruins. He had a vision to see his people who had returned back from exile no longer living in "great trouble and disgrace (Nehemiah 1:2), but having them settled in a good and secure environment. It is key for every strategic leader to give direction to their followers by setting the mission, vision and goals of the organization and clearly communicating them to their followers.

Upon setting out the mission, visions, goals and objectives, it is crucial for the strategic leader to **formulate a strategy** and spell out how to achieve it (Hughes & Beatty, 2005). Resource mobilization is vital in the actualization of a formulated strategy because a strategy without resources cannot not be materialized. Nehemiah knew that he did not have the resources to go and rebuild the city, and therefore he asked for some of the needed material from the King, including the King's authorization to be allowed to get some from the royal park.

An effective leader mobilizes his followers to rally behind his strategic vision. Through an effective communication strategy Nehemiah managed to get the residents of Jerusalem including its rulers, nobles, officials and priests to all get involved in the work, and through division of labour each one had a portion of work to do in the rebuilding of the walls and gates (Maciariello, 2003).

*Implementation of the formulated strategy* is the next step in attainment of a desired goal and achieving the set vision. To rebuild the city of Jerusalem, Nehemiah mobilized all the families and residents of Jerusalem to take part in the massive work which needed to be completed in a short span of time. Through division of labour among the families

(Maciariello, 2003) and by taking turns to work, each family was able to build a portion of the wall and therefore helped to preserve the workers' energies through taking shifts to work. Nehemiah himself was at the forefront in getting his hands dirty and doing the actual work, as well as in ensuring that enough security was provided to all the residents.

***Good management of emerging issues and conflict resolution*** is critical in leadership because wherever human beings co-exist then conflicts are bound to arise. As the building work progressed, Nehemiah was faced with various social and economic challenges which he had to carefully manage without disruption of the ongoing work. The poor people complained of not having enough food and supplies, other people had to mortgage their fields in order to get food while others were exploited by the elite and nobles in the community who charged them huge taxes. In response, Nehemiah was upset and called a meeting in order to resolve the matter. A strategic leader should be able to take care of every member of their team, mediating (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006) during conflicts by giving everyone an opportunity to be heard and together as a team come up with amicable solutions acceptable to all. Through good reasoning and negotiation skills (Beersma & De Dreu, 2002), Nehemiah engaged good strategy to defuse the tension that was mounting and he also worked with all parties to resolve and manage the conflict.

***Monitoring and evaluation*** for a strategic leader is crucial. This helps a leader to know that they are on the right path in the work they are doing, and enables them to take corrective measures in the event that they are off the target. Nehemiah was continuously involved in monitoring the progress the teams were making in building the wall and gates, but at the same time never slackened to scan their neighborhood to ensure that the people's safety and security was still guaranteed. Nehemiah optimally utilized the resources he had at hand including the human capital. He sent the men who were on duty during the day to keep guard for some time in the night, obviously very much aware of their enemies who were threatening to attack. Through continuous assessment Nehemiah ensured the effectiveness of his team was sustained (Hughes & Beatty, 2005).

Quong and Walker (2010) point out that strategic leaders do "the next right thing" which is all about **exercising ethical behavior** in leadership. Throughout his mission and leadership in rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, Nehemiah exhibited ethical behavior with much reverence for his God. He passed on this virtue to his followers and did not expect less of them. It is recorded in the Bible that he led the people of Israel to seeking repentance from God upon the realization that they had sinned against Him. Again it is recorded that when Nehemiah got wind of the fact that some of the officials were mistreating less privileged and even enslaving daughters of their own people (Nehemiah 5), he was so furious to the point of beating them and pulling their hair off! Nehemiah very proficiently managed his enemies well including managing the threat of attack they posed to Nehemiah and his people (Bennot, 2008). He was able to discern the enemies' ploy to lure him to a trap and then destroy him. Strategic leadership calls for such foresight, discernment and wisdom to deal with any threats that may arise against an organization.

In concluding his ministry and assignment, Nehemiah writes "So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the first fruits.

Remember me with favor, my God.” (Nehemiah 13: 30-31). Nehemiah was an ethical leader who served and lived to honour his God (Coggins, 2012).

Nehemiah’s strategy formation can be attributed to Planning and Environmental schools of thought to accomplish his goal of rebuilding the city. From the planning school, he evaluated his team and the task ahead of them. Some of the main strengths they had were the large number of human capital as well as the willingness of the people to do the work. After Nehemiah spoke to the people (Nehemiah 2: 18) about rebuilding of the city they exclaimed, “let us start rebuilding’ so they began this good work” (Maciariello, 2003). Weaknesses faced by the team included the mistreatment and slavery of the poor by the elite in the society, to which Nehemiah responded by rebuking the offending officials who consequently promised to stop the vice. The opportunities Nehemiah leveraged on included the political goodwill he received from King Artaxerxes, granting Nehemiah time and needed resources to go and rebuild the city of Jerusalem (Maciariello, 2003). Nehemiah evaluated the best fit in terms of the internal capabilities as well as the external possibilities to achieve his goal (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2005).

Nehemiah’s leadership strategy also relied on the environmental school of thought. Mintzberg and Lampel (1999) provide that the Environmental school of thought has to do with how an individual or an organization is capable to exercise their freedom and maneuver the challenges that the environment poses in a strategic manner. Nehemiah analyzed his internal and external environment, identified the dangers and threats that he and his team were facing and went forth to formulate a strategy that worked out well for them and ended up successfully achieving their goal of rebuilding the Jerusalem city.

#### Integrating Nehemiah’s Strategic Leadership into the 21st Century Church

Nehemiah’s strategy is very much applicable in today’s 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations, be they religious or secular. To stay relevant in the globalized and highly competitive world, organizations must always keep on scanning their business environment so as to establish that they are on the right track, and if they are not then come up with appropriate corrective remedies. Daft (2010) claims that “change, rather than stability, is the norm today. Whereas change once occurred incrementally and infrequently, today it is dramatic and constant.” How true this is even in the church today, more so in this 21<sup>st</sup> century where organizations are characterized by intense competition, digitalization, rigorous ethical scrutiny including increasing diversity, globalization and need for rapid response in a world whereby everything is requiring instantaneous solutions (Daft, 2010).

The church today must actively engage strategic thinking, which involves putting into consideration the emerging trends, evaluating to see whether these trends avail opportunities or threats, then come up with the appropriate responses to alleviate the threats but take advantage of the identified opportunities (Switzer, 2008). Just like in the workforce, the congregation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church comprises mainly of the Generations X and Y who are projected to be over eighty million people of the entire population (Bolser & Gosciej, 2015). Through prayer Nehemiah actively engaged strategic thinking whenever he faced a challenging situation and he involved the whole community in the work.

Nehemiah demonstrated how to manage emerging issues and challenges when he was faced with social and economic complaints from the community members. The emerging trends in the world today which the church has to strategically combat include threat to the family unit due to same-sex marriages and unions, abuse of the flock by those in church authority and other general leadership scandals including corruption and governance challenges. Despite these threats and challenges, church leaders should stay clear and pursue the vision of ensuring that the Gospel reaches every individual as per the charge given by Jesus Christ to His followers to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28). Phil Van Auken challenges church leadership to recognize and appreciate that spiritual and organizational/managerial activities are distinct and separate and should treat them so, noting that churches are characterized by both human (organizational) and godly (spiritual) attributes (Auken, n.d.).

Just like Nehemiah responded to the needs of the poor and those oppressed in his community, churches should also appropriately respond to needs and challenges such that for spiritual challenges the response would be through prayer, proclamation, waiting and receiving, while for organizational challenges they should respond with managerial solutions through planning, programming, execution and monitoring (Auken, n.d.). Nehemiah rebuked the elite oppressors and admonished them to make right the ills they had committed, which they did resulting to restoration of peace and justice in the community.

Looking at the future outlook of the church and its leadership, Austin-Roberson (2009) points out some of the emerging trends which necessitate the church to redesign. These trends include: globalization, whereby with the world increasingly becoming a global village then church leadership will need to remove the global boundaries and have a bigger view of the local church being intrinsically connected to a “larger kingdom agenda”. Another trend to watch out for is technology, whereby the church needs to deliberately position itself to reap from the benefits of rapid technological advances so as to effectively spread the Gospel (Austin-Roberson, 2009). Many churches especially in the urban areas are broadcasting their church services live on radio or television, with others streaming their church services and sermons live via the internet.

Adaptability to emerging issues and environment is of importance for survival of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. With the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020), the year 2020 has posed a great challenge to not only the church but many other institutions, as governments have barred assembly of large congregations and effected lockdowns and movement restrictions in a bid to stop spread of the highly infectious virus. Just as Nehemiah engaged both spiritual as well as physical strategies with prayer on one hand and a sword in his hand, churches have similarly adopted the same strategy to get through challenges resulting from the pandemic. They have continued to participate in active prayers for God to avert the Corona virus while at the same time observing physical measures to keep their members safe such as physical distancing and adherence to basic hygiene protocols. Churches have also resulted to holding virtual services, meetings and fellowships which have ensured that members are spiritually, mentally and emotionally nourished.

Marketplace evangelism will need to be enhanced in the coming years so as to reach people with the gospel at their very locations, in a time when the numbers in the traditional Sunday services are dwindling and some churches like in the United Kingdom are shutting down (The Church of England, 2020). Austin-Roberson (2009) proposes that church leaders should promote Christianity in the workplace where workers spend most of their time. Another consideration in embracing strategic leadership is the gender and generational diversity because more young people and women are taking up leadership roles in the church. Being a good administrator, Nehemiah recognized his team's potential and therefore delegated duties to the people depending on their skills and talents (Ogochi, 2018). Austin-Roberson (2009) proposes that the pastoral role's definition "will probably become broader and more flexible as women bring more variety, fresh ideas, differing perspectives and a broader range of leadership styles into church leadership". The church must therefore re-evaluate its strategic leadership positioning with a diversity lens so as to achieve success both today and in the coming years.

Nehemiah leveraged on the favorable political disposition he received from the King. He sought for the King's permission to travel, requested for resources and in addition to be provided for with political cover which guaranteed his safe transit. Opportunities that churches can leverage on include favorable policies and laws from governments that safeguard Christian-based values including safeguarding the family unit in a nation. For example, the Kenyan constitution states that "every adult has the right to marry a person of the opposite sex..." (Kenya Law, 2010), which then guarantees procreation and preservation of families. Present day's political goodwill, just like in Nehemiah's time is a great opportunity. Threats faced by the church include vices that continue to penetrate the world including destruction of young people's lives due to consumption of drugs, and legalizing homosexuality which as indicated above is a big threat to the existence of sound family unit in future years (Oginde, 2018).

Strategically, Nehemiah modelled servant leadership to his followers since he did not fold his arms and issue orders as the people worked. He however joined the people and got his hands dirty as they all worked together to raise the walls of the city and at the same time safeguard from the enemy's attacks. Every Christian leader should follow in Nehemiah and ultimately Jesus Christ's example of leading by example through servant leadership and not lording their authority on their followers. Byler (2006) puts it plainly that "if you're not ready to serve, get out of Christian leadership!" (p. 53).



## **Conclusion**

Nehemiah exemplified strategic leadership as he rallied and capably led his team to great success of rebuilding the walls and repairing the gates (Regent University, 2012) of the city of Jerusalem as recorded in the Holy Bible (Nehemiah 1-5). Nehemiah earnestly prayed and relied on God to help him succeed in his mission, thus paying great allegiance to his “employer”. Fearlessly seeking for permission and resources from his King to go and rebuild the city, Nehemiah formulated his mission, vision and set the objectives (Hughes & Beatty, 2005) to realize their success. Nehemiah applied the planning and environmental schools of thought in his strategy formation (Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). He assessed the situation he was facing, secured the needed resources and then established his team including leaders and delegated various assignments among the people in order to accomplish the work.

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