A Builder's Mind: The Strategic Roles of Humility, Wisdom, and Cooperation in Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Individuals, teams, or organizations endeavoring to construct, build, or even repair programs, structures, or systems are often confronted with conflicting motivations. Because of this, the temptation to get sidetracked, to diminish or exceed scope and expectations, is possible. These types of internal and external threats to progress fuel this writing's contents. The outcry in many sectors, communities, and nations for leadership development and knowledge sharing promotes engagement and improvement. Senge (1990, 2006) reasoned that individual and collective actions frame and inform associated reality (p. 3). For him, identifying the specific areas of potential and expansion precipitates individuals' behavior within a collection of related activities that promote lasting transformation.

Serving as the foundation for this writing are the varied cognitions within the mind of a builder. Leaf (2013) asserted that the mind is separate and apart from the brain as the mind (beyond neurological and

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biological functionality) serves as a filter for interpreting sensory and experiential inputs. Additionally, the mind's processing ultimately incites an individual's corresponding actions. As such, one's surroundings, the inputs as mentioned earlier, and the conclusions produced by them, fuel an individual's subsequent behaviors (Leaf, 2013; Martinez, 2022).

When leaders are faced with typical questions of scope, risk, schedule, and resources, there are a number of overt and less pronounced considerations necessary for success and effectiveness. Likewise, leaders with a mind to build are often borne out of their awareness of a problem or need requiring a solution. By utilizing the mental model and cognitive framework presented within the selected ancient narrative chronicling Nehemiah's life and activity, established and burgeoning leaders with aspirations to build are challenged to think of new and sustainable ways of incorporating humility, wisdom, and cooperation into their leadership practice.

Problems Create Builders: Nehemiah

> And I said to the King… I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it. (New King James Bible *[NKJ]*, 1982/2004, Nehemiah 2:5)

As an early exercise within this writing, it is important to spend some time to summarize Nehemiah's narrative because it serves as the backdrop, foundation, and primary example for our examination of a builder's mind and leadership activities. This ancient narrative sits squarely within the Old Testament portion of the biblical canon and represents a period in ancient Israel's history following their capture by the Babylonians. This portion of the Old Testament biblical canon partially fulfills the prophecy of Jeremiah, where he spoke directly about the ways in which Babylon would dominate this nation and how a people guilty of divided allegiances could be renewed and restored through obedience to Jewish law and hope in a sovereign God (see Jer. 9 for more detail). Within the cooperatively focused, yet divergently composed and potentially singularly authored books of Ezra and Nehemiah are the triumphs, defeats, and leadership activities of Zerubbabel (see Ezra Chapters 1–6), Ezra (see Ezra Chapters 7–10), and Nehemiah, which is encapsulated in 13 Chapters (Amzallag, 2018; Coggins, 2012; Fried, 2008; Kidner, 2016;

Kratz, 2005; Laird, 2016; VanderKam, 2011; Wright, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2012). These diversely inspired leaders are the primary protagonists within the period, some 50 years after the Babylonian exile, in which the Israelites attempted to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel (with Persian King Cyrus' permission) spearheads the original post-exilic migration and rebuilding effort at the command and encouragement of the Persian King. After approximately 60 years, Ezra assumes leadership and feels called to educate the community on the finer points and proper adherence to the Jewish Torah and associated interactive practice standards. Ultimately, the focus rests on the work spearheaded by Nehemiah in his pursuit to rebuild Jerusalem's city walls which remained destroyed after many years of inhabitance by Judeans (Fried, 2008, 2011; Kidner, 2016; VanderKam, 2011; Wright, 2012).

This portion of the ancient narrative is not just an exhibition of the migratory patterns of the Israelite people but also serves, within this exercise, as a method for investigating leadership practices within several diverse contextual environments. Examination of leader identity, self-leadership skills, power, and effective use of resources (people, time, currency), is encapsulated within the selected pericope in the Jewish canonical tradition and scholarly consensus of leadership studies. While much of the focus within this writing is anchored in the first six chapters of Nehemiah, it is important to remember that there is no way to extract its contents from the book of Ezra. Its content should be viewed and reviewed in light of both writings along with the period they represent within Israel's history (Coggins, 2012; Kratz, 2005; VanderKam, 2011; Wright, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2012). As such, King Cyrus's declaration in the first chapter of Ezra provides the language for the prevailing thought line within a builder's mind. It illustrates the motivating language of selection, distinction, and activation for individuals willing and able to serve in a leadership role. "Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem ... and build ..." (NKJ, 1982/2004, Ezra 1:3). Later echoed within Nehemiah, "So, it pleased the king to send me ..." (NKJ, 1982/2004, Nehemiah 2:6b).

Curiosity and Self-Leadership: Humility's Role in a Builder's Mind

> ... I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped ... and concerning Jerusalem. (NKJ, 1982/2004, Nehemiah 1:2b)

Nehemiah is recognized as the son of Hakaliah in the opening verse of the book and immediately shifts focus from emphasizing Judean identity and the proper combination of communal and spiritual practices to a personal journal of Nehemiah's life and work within the ancient near east (see Neh. Chapters 1–6, 13). The remainder of the book of Nehemiah focuses on the Judean community, Jewish social order, and other covenant-keeping (religious) activities.

He is recognized as an official cupbearer (see Neh. 1:11) and as governor of Yehud, serving within the Persian government (see Neh. 5:14; 12:26); his leadership practice is a primary focus within the selected text. Nehemiah's perspective as a Jewish exile and his inquiry about the status of others prompts his transition from serving King Artaxerxes to leading his people in a massive rebuilding effort (see Neh. 1:1–4). Nehemiah's curiosity prompted his inquiry into the status of returned exiles in Jerusalem. The disastrous state of the city was not a minor issue. Its broken down walls and incomplete city structures left its inhabitants open for enemy attack, cultural compromise, and assimilation, which over time threatened to eliminate their cultural, social, and spiritual designation as Israelites chosen by God (Fried, 2008, 2011; Laird, 2016). After receiving Hanani's disastrous report about the state of Jerusalem and the returned exiles, Nehemiah surrenders his role as an official and seeks direction, guidance, and comfort from God. At this juncture, this builder's mind is equipped with humility. Based on the opening passages of the book of Nehemiah, it was immediately upon hearing about a problem that this soon-to-be-builder eliminated presumption and explored a larger plan of action.

Humility is defined as the state of being humble (Merriam-Webster, 2021). This cognitive leadership trait refers to an individual's ability to abandon thoughts and motivations fueled by arrogance, pride, superiority, or assumption. Many scholars have suggested that leaders exhibiting true humility benefit greatly the organizations, groups, and individuals

they serve (Collins, 2001a, 2001b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). More-over, Comte-Sponville (2001) posited that humble leaders love truth over self and reflect the type of self-management informed by accurate assessments of individual competence and capability. This level of honest self-awareness avoids overextension and diminishes activities motivated by bloated personal assessments or misaligned ethical values (Caldwell et al., 2017; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Tangney, 2000, 2002). Morris and his colleagues (2005) provided three dimensions of humility in leadership that are resident within the cognition of building leaders (a) self-awareness, (b) openness, and (c) transcendence (larger perspective and motivating vision).

There is a consistent line of activity and thought associated with Nehemiah based almost entirely on what Peterson and Seligman (2004) described as reality-based feedback, which fuels and mediates high levels of humility within leaders. Nehemiah abandoned his assumption, asked a question, and spent months seeking divine counsel by praying, ruminating, and ultimately developing an early plan of action to address the problem. Abandoning all comforts associated with his current role, he risked social embarrassment, diminished reputation, and status in the eyes of his employer, King Artaxerxes, by humbly laying bare his authentic and transparent disappointment in pursuit of a larger vision and potential solution (see Neh. 2:1–4).

Unity and Negotiation: Cooperation's Role in a Builder's Mind

So **we** built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for **the people had a mind to work**. (NKJ, 1982/2004, Nehemiah 4:6)

Mirroring the collaborative nature of the content and connections between the Old Testament writings of Ezra and Nehemiah is the associated factors and benefits of cooperative and collaborative leadership within a builder's mind. Moving into the second chapter of Nehemiah, readers are drawn into the high-stakes situation that this cupbearer to Persia's King faced. Nehemiah forgoes all pleasantries and is visibly downcast in the King's presence, having just heard about the destruction of his

ancestral city. The cupbearer's depressed countenance is so uncharacteristic that the King notices and allows Nehemiah to make a request. To which, Nehemiah informs him of his desire to rebuild the city. Artaxerxes obliges and sends Nehemiah with official documentation serving as a free entry and mobility passport to safely traverse through several governor-led regions throughout the Trans-Euphrates region (Laird, 2016; VanderKam, 2011). Nehemiah and his royal military guards can also obtain the supplies necessary to repair the city's gates and build Jerusalem's fortress with walls to provide adequate defense from future enemies (see Neh. 2:7–8). Nehemiah 2:9–11 reveals that the letters from both King Artaxerxes and the military guards offer him safe passage and favorable traveling conditions within each governors' territory (NKJ, 1982/2004).

As is expected, this, nor any building project, is completed without its own set of specific difficulties. Upon his arrival, Nehemiah is immediately challenged by two sources of antagonistic opposition. Tobiah the Ammonite and Sanballat the Horonite. Nehemiah decides to inspect the city's walls under cover of night, in a strategic move reflecting a mix of fear and wisdom (see Neh. 2:12–15). Upon surveying the damage firsthand, he is incited to action by the diminished state of his ancestral home. He delivers a galvanizing speech to the community laying out the details of his intention and plans for his rebuilding project (see Neh. 2:16–18). With a fresh dose of purpose and an increased sense of urgency, Nehemiah assumes an even more prominent position as a leader. He denounces detractors, addresses the workforce members directly to ensure clear articulation of intention, and warns those not fully aligned with this divinely inspired plan of action (see Neh. 2:19). Those unwilling, unable, or determined to speak negatively about the rebuilding project, are warned that they will not only be unable to share in the fruits of the labor but are also in opposition with God (see Neh. 2:20).

While this may seem like a means to divide or create a specific kind of outgroup, it is important to note that there will always be critics and those opposed to the new idea in both ancient and contemporary contexts. A building leader is best served by frank and transparent communication about projects to ensure no blind spots delay progression. Elimination of hidden progress, subversive work practices, and by clearly laying out intentions, workforce members are sure about their role, and everyone is free to choose how they would like to either participate or abstain. This aspect is crucial for engendering unity and ensures program participants

know what they are getting into from the onset. Although challenges continue to come through Chapter 3, Nehemiah elects not to waste energy responding directly to his challengers. He continues to pray, plan, and pursue the vision. In Chapter 4, the challenge accelerates from verbal attacks to threats of a physical attack from enemies, which precipitates a strategic shift. Having a clear delineation of the various familial clans available from Chapter 3, Nehemiah positions a guard (see Neh. 4:5) and begins to equip the people with information, building tools, and weaponry to assuage fears and prepare them for an effective defense from attacks (see Neh. 4:10–17).

Beyond external threats, Nehemiah also had to deal with some internal threats attempting to hinder progression within the community. Nehemiah Chapter 5 illustrates an internal conflict worth examining. It provides an approachable landscape for studying the role of leadership cognition (beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes) in the face of disunity, dissension, or climates requiring difficult decisions. There is an outcry among inhabitants about interpersonal disputes (see Neh. 5:1–13) about land, finances, and offspring utilized in servitude to satisfy outstanding debt transactions (see Neh. 5:2–5). Nehemiah, confronted with inequitable economic issues within the community, appeals to their shared lineage by exposing the fallacy attached to "exacting usury" from others in the form of exorbitant loans (NKJ, 1982/2004, Nehemiah 5:7). In reaction to this particular issue, Nehemiah institutes a policy and response with a two-fold purpose. He insists that immediate debt dissolution alleviates this burdensome strain from the indebted parties and reinforces the imperative for shared identity and unity within the community (Fried, 2011; Guillaume, 2010; Laird, 2016; VanderKam, 2011; Wright, 2012). The necessity for completion fuels the negotiation of this internal crisis within the builder's mind. However, a bigger imperative within this and contexts like it is anchoring personal dedication to value the people directly to the work they represent, in full view of all parties (stakeholders). Within this adjudication of righteous response and difficult decision-making, the Judean community recognized a mindset fixed and bound to both ethics and cultural identity driven by solidarity (Altmann, 2013; Guillaume, 2010). Reinforcing solidarity of common religious and social practices establishing a precedent for the remission of debts in the Torah (see Deut. 15:1–6) is paramount here to pursue a project intently fueled by a desire to restore a city that represented the epicenter of divine presence, purpose, and promise. This idea is indicated in their collective

response in Nehemiah 5:9 and reinforced by their cooperative agreement, articulation, and oath reinforced by priests (see also Neh. 5:14–19).

Nehemiah embodies the kind of dexterity operationalized within the mind and agency of building leaders. He adeptly extends an invitation to his table to recognize the elevated social status of elites within the community while also appealing to their sense of brotherhood and shared purpose, which relieved tensions by galvanizing a new alliance based on inherited spiritual lineage (Wright, 2010). Proper acknowledgment of the many expert accounts of the historical and social implications of a divided Judean identity should be recognized here. Because, beyond the economic disparities and personal refutations to the tasks associated with this building project, there are also two conflicting contextual realities acknowledged in Ezra Chapters 1–6; 7–10, and resident within the focus text in Nehemiah. The specific designations associated with those individuals and clans returning from Babylonian exile (allochthonous) and those descendants in Jerusalem who were never part of the exilic community recognized as autochthonous residents (Edenburg, 2021; Römer, 2020; Wright, 2007a, 2007b).

Contemporary application for effective leadership based on a builder's mind recognizes that although there is social and professional stratification within all organizational systems, it does not have to present insurmountable difficulties as the goal of negotiation is agreement. Laird (2016) explained that Nehemiah focused intently on the "unity of returnees" as the primacy of a solidified and singularly defined people is "subsumed into a single component of the larger community" (p. 94). In this way, the value of conformity is not in a dismissal or denial of established social roles but instead reveals the superiority of agreement and uninhibited activity and labor. This thought is evidenced in Chapter 5 of Nehemiah's book to assuage interpersonal tensions by bolstering the language and activity of consensus and collaboration among and within the larger Judean brotherhood. Beyond this large focus of community agreement, there are also many strategic negotiations with sovereign powers, socio-political processes, along with numerous contentions of legitimacy, economy, and territory that Nehemiah embodies that are beneficial in revealing the ruminations of a builder's mind (see Neh. 1–6).

Response and Decision: Wisdom's Role in a Builder's Mind

After serious thought, I ... (NKJ, 1982/2004, Nehemiah 5:7a)

An inquiry can often reveal problems, weaknesses, or areas requiring development, much like disagreement, discontentment, and inequity precipitates negotiation in pursuit of unity. A leader's response to new or emerging knowledge requires a wise application and proper response. This response is activated and, in many ways, can be operationalized through the leaders' decisions. A decision is motivated by knowledge, utilized as an extension of understanding, and solidified by the corresponding action. As such, wisdom and leader decision-making operate as a valued utility within psychosocial applications. There are many occasions within the first six chapters of Nehemiah's biographical account that his consideration revealed the contents of a builder's perception and reasoning. Within this portion of the chapter, examining multi-layered contemplation as a prerequisite for response and decision-making is revealed.

Metacognition within contemporary social science research is not uniformly defined or measured (Allen & Armour-Thomas, 1993; Black et al., 2016; Flavell, 1979; Marshall-Miles et al., 2000; Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994; Schraw & Dennison, 1994). For the purposes of this writing, the recognition and examination of resident metacognitive dimensions are couched within a characterization of individuals operationalized by their ability to solve problems, make decisions, and create meaning within complex social environments (Batha & Carroll, 2007; Black et al., 2016; Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Marshall-Miles et al., 2000; Robertson, 2013). This framework has also been examined in correlation to other determinant leadership traits such as critical thinking, self-leadership skills, self-efficacy, and social responsibility within various professions, organizations, or industries (Magno, 2010; Wang et al., 2016). This juxtaposition of effective leadership activity and psychosocial agency is reminiscent of the subject texts' reflection of the mediating effect of Nehemiah's leadership cognition, style, and decisions, in view of the larger Judean community's well-being and lifestyle.

Within the selected biblical narrative are any number of historical, social, and economic intersections that inform the varied perspectives surrounding Nehemiah's role as an imperial appointee and Judean leader.

Because of this, his wise arbitration of at times conflicting motivations between the Judean community, diverse Persian rulers, Jewish priests, and other ad hoc regional personalities all needed to be balanced and properly engaged, given a much larger goal to rebuild (Laird, 2016). It is important to note that although Nehemiah overcame any resident fears (see Neh. 2:2b) associated with revealing his heart to the King, and he employed a level of diplomacy and wisdom by reinforcing his allegiance to Artaxerxes sovereignty and pleasure, repeating the phrase, "…if it pleases the king…" (NKJ, 1982/2004, Nehemiah 2:5–7). The crown's willingness to issue delegated authority in the form of letters, resources, and personnel (see Neh. 2:8) further reinforced confident assurance that Nehemiah embodied attributes fitting with adjudication of law and God-given wisdom to lead his people (Laird, 2016; Wright, 2012). Leadership demands the assumption of full responsibility for the consequences and associated activity aligned with one's responses and wise decisions. This activity reflects the didactic demands of diverse people groups amidst strong critique and challenge, threats of physical attacks of self and others, and the anxiety, anger, and frustrations resident within any organizational project.

From a spiritual standpoint, as a Jewish man, Nehemiah would have been well versed in the Genesis narrative within the Torah, illustrating the utility of wisdom within the creation story. Quinn and Strickland (2016) shared that "creation was built by wisdom, and thus wisdom was built into creation" (p. 57). Because of this, believers in Yahweh would assume, within their respective and varied leadership roles and capacities, an embodiment of how their thoughts and associated responses to the world's events should reflect the wisdom of their God. This is why there is a consistent and enduring reference within Nehemiah's story on his insistence, reliance, and knowledge acquisition through prayer. Ultimately, the embodied ruminations associated with wisdom, especially within the life of Nehemiah, are found within his meditations but are also reflective of his responses to counsel in every form. The purpose of continued interest in his activity (beyond spiritual edification) is to uncover the beliefs, values, and attitudes he carried that informed his decisions, particularly when confronted with authority, threat, or disagreement from others.

DISCUSSION

"Wisdom does not provide rules for behavior... but attempts to instill a type of understanding in the individual, who still retains final choice over his or her behavior" (McGeough, 2008, p. 47).

Sustained transformation and project completion require knowledge and complementary activity. The disbursement and acquisition of knowledge in this framework are activated through many layers of intentional commitment and motivating action. The ultimate goal intrinsic to constructing a new project, program, or structure serving as a type of container, is the promotion of expanded capacity for direct and indirect users. At this point in this writing, it is imperative to note that while Nehemiah 4:6 indicated a collective commitment to the rebuilding projects, it ends with a seemingly disheartening synopsis. The conclusion reveals all of the ways that the Israelites failed to maintain, expand, or treasure their "renovated containers" in the form of the temple (see Neh. 13:10–14), their community and spiritual practices (see Neh. 13:23–31), and even the city walls (see Neh. 13:15:22). While on its face, it would appear that this is an indictment on Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah's leadership prowess and praxis, this reader interprets the degeneration of the temple, spiritual life, and the city walls as a reflection of the ways that great leadership intention, goals, and motivations can devolve over time as neither charisma nor chaos is sufficient for organizational, group, or program sustainment. Von Rad's (1993) work encapsulates this sentiment with a wonderful exhibition of what he describes as the limitation of wisdom. McGeough (2008) summarized von Rad's assertions within the quote opening this section of the chapter. In this way, the links between understanding and associated activity are aligned perfectly within this exploration of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah's biographical memoir reveals a concerted portrayal within an ancient text that the demonstration of intellectual prowess, emotional intelligence (compassion), morality, and judgment are characteristics of a type of heroic mindset worthy of following and emulating (Laird, 2016; McGeough, 2008; Wright, 2012). These specific character traits (among others) recognized in a builder's mind must also be filtered into the culture and consciousness of those they influence. An extension and potential complement to this chapter would be a further investigation into how effective leaders oversee great building (or rebuilding)

projects and the ways that workforce member praxis within an organization, community, or group culture can shift over time. These shifts may reveal themselves as diminished motivation levels or job satisfaction. Most project managers and visionary building leaders begin with the end in mind. In this instance, the end did not include the continued cooperation of the end-user. The valuable lessons in the Ezra-Nehemiah texts reveal the importance of planning for the uninterrupted viability of the original vision by instilling virtues, values, and mindsets into the workforce members. In many ways, visionary leaders are great with engendering support for completing building projects and successfully erecting new containers of possibility but may find it difficult to maintain faithful adherence to those principles and associated activity. Perhaps this is because the language and praxis for building are misaligned entirely with the language and culture of longevity, maintenance, and ownership. Planning for the event, and participating in the event, is completely different from cleaning up after the event. In the same ways that demolition at the start of a building project injects anticipation and excitement within teams that are not replicated in the hearts of those designated to haul away debris at the end of construction.

The roles of self-leadership and interpersonal skills within varied leadership mental models are vital. In this sphere, an acknowledgment of the need for awareness about how retention studies should extend beyond limited Human Resource department personnel discussions into the retention of vision when the building is completed, or when enterprising leaders have less of a role to play, or when focus transitions to new building plans. There is a necessity within organizations for vertical succession planning and intercultural communication competence, as builders may be effective leaders in conception and construction, but also need to teach, train, mentor, and transfer responsibility to others following them for operation, maintenance, and the future governance of the structure, project, or vision (Black et al., 2016; DeRue et al., 2012).

Some reading the concluding section of this chapter may feel that this is a darkened cloud of pessimism and futility over a seemingly bright and direct reflection of enterprising cognitive models. However, the overarching purpose and intention of this writer are to prompt ambitious leaders to spend time not only envisioning new building projects but also spend time in their applications of humility, wisdom, and cooperation, focusing on ways to spark vision that builds lasting meaning for the work in the hearts of followers. In this way, effective leaders' cognitive processing

is sustained in the lives of those who follow them by implementing enduring points of meaningful connection, interaction, expansion, and replication (through succession). Generally speaking, every builder hopes that what they are building becomes a container of possibility generating solutions for current or emerging sets of issues. The awareness of those needs, presented as problems in a builder's mind, prompts a desire to act and necessitates the development of blueprints and clear plans for both building and sustainment over time.

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