

Realising Potential

One of the ways I describe my work to others is by saying that I'm involved in "helping realise the potential in others". This sounds rather grand but it helps people understand my role and how I can assist them in developing their organisation, their colleagues or themselves as individuals. I looked for a definition of potential and came across this: "a latent excellence or ability that may or may not be developed". We all have potential and we all have a responsibility to see our own potential, and the potential in others, being developed and realised.

In Romans 12 Paul writes that "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully". The key phrase here is "let him", our responsibility is to let others exercise their gifts (their potential) and I believe that some of us need to be even more proactive in this. God has given all of us gifts and abilities and we shouldn't let these gifts gather dust and cobwebs but we should unpack them, use them and develop them for the Kingdom of God. This isn't just our own gifts but the potential of others. If you are a leader or manager of others you have this responsibility. In order to do this we need to answer two questions: What potential is there within the people I am leading? And how am I realising this potential?

This Summer 2009 Christian Training Newsletter will help you answer these questions. Firstly by explaining three different ways in which you can identify potential, then we will look at how this potential can be developed through training, development and coaching.

This is not to make us look good and feel smug; it is God's Kingdom and God's purposes that we are working towards. A few verses earlier in Romans we find this: "For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen". We are doing this for God not for ourselves.



Identifying Potential

So how do we know about the potential there is within the people we work with? It may be that we are much more aware of the lack of potential around us by being frustrated by incompetence and ineffectiveness. In business this has been seen as always the fault of the individual, I've even heard leaders say that a person is a "waste of space" - this is wrong. If we believe that all people have potential then no-one is a waste of space, they may just be in the "wrong" space for their abilities. We have all met people who once they find the right space, the right job or ministry they are so much happier and content.

Trying to be someone you are not is immensely stressful and is not honouring to God. He has given gifts that are to be used not put on a shelf, and if we are involved in a ministry that we are not gifted to do we have to have a serious re-think. If you are a leader you have an added duty - to ensure that you as an individual are in the right place doing the right thing and also to ensure that the people you are responsible for are also in the right place doing the right thing.

Here are a few ideas that you could try to identify the potential of others.

Let them have a go at it!



Some people just need to be given an opportunity to try something. Brendan Foster (BBC Sports Commentator and a former middle distance runner) was asked what it was like to be the fastest man in the world at running 3000 metres (he broke the world record in 1974) he said that he may not have been the fastest man in the world but he was the fastest man who tried! There are many gifts and abilities in the kingdom that need to be used. We could let someone just have a go at it, just try it – as long as we do it in a safe place where we don't ridicule someone and put them off ever trying anything new again. This needs careful management.

Conduct a Skills Audit



There are plenty of skills audit materials available on the internet and although many of them are prescriptive in their approach (whereas I find descriptive more helpful) they will at least start a process of identifying the potential around us. But be warned that if you conduct a skills audit in your church or mission agency there will be expectancy that you will do something about it. I have heard complaints from people who said of themselves that they were "good at preaching" and were not then given the opportunity to exercise their gifting.

Ask others



If you want to know the latent ability of people around you don't ask the individual themselves as they will either overplay their ability or be too modest about what they are able to do. Ask other people about the gifts and skills they see in others – basically asking people to "grass" on those around them. You may be surprised to see what pops up and how your own thinking is challenged.

Developing Potential

Now to the crux of the matter. We've found some "latent excellence or ability that may or may not be developed" and we want to make the most of what we've found – how do we do it? And the expected answer is training – and yes this is the answer - but we need to be careful about what we are trying to do with this. We could squeeze the potential out of someone by trying to make them fit into our own way of thinking, where as what we want to really do is enable people to grow into the individuals God has called them to be. All we want is Jill Smith to be the best Jill Smith she can be and not to be disappointed that she isn't a good Clare Brown!

The Procrustes Approach

The bed of Procrustes is part of Greek mythology. Procrustes had an iron bed onto which he invited every passerby to lie down. If the guest proved too tall, he would amputate the excess length; victims who were too short were stretched on the rack until they were long enough. Nobody ever fitted the bed exactly.

This is exactly how some leaders, managers and even trainers work – they have an idea of how things should be done and expect people to conform to that expectation. No one will ever fit the expectation and so part of their potential is stretched to make it fit and some gifts and abilities are "cut off" because they are excess to what is required. We welcome people who want to serve and to fulfil a role but then their way of doing the task annoys us and we look at ways of moulding them into the "right" way of doing the task.



Be honest, is this the way you have seen people being "developed" and also maybe criticised? Rather than allowing them to fulfil the role in "their" way they have to fit with "the way we do things here". It is putting a square peg into a round hole, and all that happens is that we see the gaps in ability and pain is caused. The focus has been on how they do something rather than the results of what they are doing. If I used clichés I would say "there is more than one way of skinning a cat!"

So if this is the way that you are developing potential in your organisation what can you do to allow people to develop in their own way rather than making them conform and comply? The key things that should be avoided are these words and phrases; you should, I would, what you've got to understand is, that won't work, no way etc. In fact, avoiding anything that imposes your thinking and your ways upon someone else. If not, the Procrustes Approach may well stifle development rather than help realise potential. This requires us to have an honest assessment of our approach to the training and development of others.

Another Approach

So if the Procrustes Approach doesn't work then how can potential be developed in a church or mission organisation? The opposite of the Procrustes Approach is the Paul Approach.

The Paul Approach

"We are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvellously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't" (Romans 12:4-6 – The Message)

Paul goes on to write that whatever it is that we are gifted to do we should get on and do it – but this would lead to anarchy wouldn't it? Everyone doing their own thing because that is what God has gifted them to do? Perhaps this is where leadership and stewardship (management) have a responsibility and also the rest of the church. "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Ephesians 4:11-12).

How can this be done? Here are seven ideas:

- Help alongside others when they need it
- Be fair - treating everyone equally
- Listen to and really understand people
- Never self-promote
- Treat each individual as unique
- Back-up and support others
- Encourage others to grow, to learn and to take on as much as they want to, at a pace they can handle



Please try one of these over the next few weeks and let me know how you get on.

Thanks for reading this Christian Training newsletter. I do hope you found something in it useful for your work or ministry. If you have any feedback for me please do get in touch – contact details at the top of this page.

Brian