



Rewarding Leadership by Cynthia D. Weems

In the days following the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Barack Obama, commentators and pundits questioned the wisdom of the decision. Is it too soon? What has he truly accomplished? What about the other deserving candidates who have been working for peace in difficult situations for decades? The Nobel committee responded to these questions stating that President Obama's creation of a new climate in international politics was in line with the ideals of the award and that they felt compelled to offer whatever support necessary toward producing concrete results in achieving these ideals. They also confirmed that Alfred Nobel's will specifically states that the prizes should be awarded for work accomplished in the immediately preceding year.

The commentary surrounding this award has caused me to reflect on how this same approach to leadership development is played out in congregations. How do congregations celebrate persons who point toward the achievement of the congregation's mission? And how do these celebrations occur consistently and frequently, rather than as standard "lifetime achievement" awards?

Frances Hesselbein has called mission focus "the leadership essential" because it is a focus on mission that gets our organizations where we want to go. Encouraging mission focus at every level of a congregation's life builds energy toward true and lasting change. Often there is no better way to encourage a person than simply to reward fruitful action toward the mission.

Some years ago, I served an inner city congregation. During that time, I had a great deal of difficulty dealing with one particular couple. They were important leaders who directed our outreach ministries to the community including clothing and meal programs for the poor. Yet their attitude often seemed negative. They had experienced hurt in their lives and, I believe, may have acted out of that hurt when dealing with others and leading their ministry.

After a long, yet successful, process of reorganizing our outreach ministries to better meet the needs of our community, we recognized this couple for their hard work, dedication and innovation. We celebrated them at the same time that we celebrated a change within one of our long-standing ministries. Although the couple was at first reluctant about the changes, after this celebration they became champions of innovation and helped implement the changes. They had been rewarded for strides they had taken that pointed toward our goal – to reach more people for Jesus Christ by meeting their basic human needs. This couple was determined not to let the award, or the church, down.

Receiving an award is an honor. And, as President Obama surely knows, it comes with great responsibility. In a recent cartoon, President Obama is shown wearing a heavy, oversized Nobel medal around his neck. Linus, a familiar character from the Peanuts cartoons, raising a finger to make a point, declares, "There's no heavier burden than a great potential." Rewarding leadership at every level of organizational life creates a weight of potential among the entire community that, when carried together, becomes the impetus for success.

How does this happen in our congregations?

First, consider the ways people are being rewarded. Is it consistent? Are the awards or recognitions in line with the mission of the church? Do they point directly to actions that will further the mission? If not, how might these awards be altered to fit your mission focus more directly?

Second, consider those who do not receive consistent recognition or public affirmation. I have found that nursery attendants, custodians, web designers, AV technicians, and those in food preparation receive very infrequent affirmation. Yet these tasks are important for helping a ministry to succeed. How can we help each of these important persons feel directly connected to the mission of the church? How would an appropriate recognition of their work add to the energy and commitment they bring to the mission of the congregation?

Third, remember that larger, deeply emotional and spiritual themes invigorate most people and communities. It is important to remind people continually that joy, passion, purpose and hope are a fundamental part of our Christian story and life together.

Over the past months, some commentators have stated that the Nobel committee was "rewarding hope" when recognizing President Obama. Most of our churches know how hard hope is to come by. Perhaps it should be rewarded more often. Perhaps there are people in our churches who, without title or position, simply exhibit hope through their character and quiet demeanor.

Church members like all others need to be recognized not just for lifetime achievement but also for leadership and service in the present. One of our most important tasks as leaders is to find ways to reward leadership that points us in the right direction and adds momentum to our mission and purpose as Christ's body in the world.

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