



Transform Aid
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Episode 7: Transformational Leadership

Impact Leaders

Leigh Hatcher: Hello and welcome to Impact leaders for a world without poverty, supporting and equipping business leaders to grow their business, give purpose to their people, and make a transformational impact on global poverty. I'm Leigh Hatcher. Of all the books and articles you've read, videos you've viewed, podcasts you've listened to on leadership. How many of them are anchored in the experiences of life or death? Anthony Sell has been there many times over 15 years of humanitarian work where he's learned some powerful lessons about transformational leadership when communities really need it to survive. No margin to fail, do or die. He's director of international programs at Transform Aid International. Ant welcome. It's great to meet you. Give us a few snapshots of where you've worked and doing what in your 15 years working in overseas development.

Anthony Sell: Thanks, Leigh. I've had the opportunity to bear witness to a lot of people who have gone through hell. I had the opportunity to spend time in Myanmar during some of the darkest days of the military and then cyclone Nargis that hit the not so long ago. I've had the opportunity to sit with pastors in Rwanda, post genocide, sit with leaders in post apartheid South Africa. More recently I've had the opportunity to work with leaders in Kenya where we had the political violence in 2007, where 1100 people died in a matter of weeks after some severe riots in the main capital, Nairobi, over

600,000 people were driven from their homes. Then north, in Nepal, earthquakes there in Nepal where we saw in April, 2015, close to 9,000 people lose their lives and close to a million people lose their homes. And in Lebanon where we're trying to work with people who are fleeing the Syrian violence, who have taken up refuge in that country and working with leaders there, particularly church leaders and organisational leaders there.

Leigh Hatcher: What have a remarkable list of experiences.

Anthony Sell: It's a privilege in many regards to bear witness to their lives and what they're achieving around the world.

Leigh Hatcher: A privilege and a pressure.

Anthony Sell: Yes tremendous pressure for them, especially, living in those contexts. I get to come home. That is their home and they're trying to make a life there.

Leigh Hatcher: Ant what qualities would you think you'd bring to those kind of circumstances that enabled you to be effective in your transformational humanitarian work and to lead them into what's going to hopefully be a better place?

Anthony Sell: Talking to my wife last night, she was saying to me one of the things that she appreciates is calm, this bringing a calm presence and how powerful that can be to people that you lead. I think also just being discerning and focused on priorities, drawing people and coalescing them around a purpose is, I think really critical in these circumstances. Having a firm core but soft edges, I think is absolutely essential as a leader.

Leigh Hatcher: Flesh that out for me.

Anthony Sell: I think knowing who you are, knowing your values, knowing your principles is your firm core. They're not up for negotiation. What is up for negotiation is the relationships that you have with those that you lead and being able to be flexible and agile. But that doesn't mean being flippant, changing all the time. It says, I know who I am and I'm firm about that. However, I want to be able to understand who others are and be ready to fit with them and in some cases be adaptive.

Leigh Hatcher: That relationship thing is a critical part of this work.

Anthony Sell: Really critical. Understanding people and understanding that every person is having an experience in that moment, not just yourself. I think in leadership, one of the dangers is to define a

moment by your experience, whereas having the humility to understand that others are also experiencing this. What does it mean for them?

Leigh Hatcher: It's not only your experience, but it's your character and their character and characteristics. Everyone's different.

Anthony Sell: Everyone is completely different. And again, I think that's comes back to knowing yourself well, and when you know yourself well, you also know your weakness as well as your strengths. But then be able to look for their strengths and how you can ultimately help them realize those dreams.

Leigh Hatcher: So leading on from that, a critical part of this for you is working with local partners. Going on a journey with them. You actually learn from them.

Anthony Sell: Absolutely.

Leigh Hatcher: As they learn from you.

Anthony Sell: Yeah, definitely. We have a motto, he at Transform Aid that it's about making local knowledge, global and global knowledge local. And that's really critical because obviously globally there's a lot of thinking that's going on. Some brilliant researchers, some brilliant writers who are putting together new thoughts, but what's happening on the ground? That knowledge and that wisdom, that's hard won from difficult circumstances must be taken into account. So yes, you can have all kinds of very experienced people writing and thinking through what needs to happen in the world today to bring about effective change. But we can't ignore the grassroots wisdom, that street wisdom that exists, that people are just trying to get by develop and how we can harness that.

Leigh Hatcher: And the key to that is again relationship

Anthony Sell: It is relationships, it's relationships and listening. Ultimately I think the greatest tool of relationships is to listen.

Leigh Hatcher: So what does transformational leadership look like in those communities, in your experience?

Anthony Sell: Beyond a doubt, courage, courage to lead. In so many circumstances I think the normal human reaction when there is strife or whether it's severe suffering is to withdraw. We see it in our natural physical reactions to pain, we withdraw. It's very natural for us. So for those people that lead, they'll step forward in a moment when most are stepping back. So I think that courage is

enormously important. I think a clear sense of the horizons that are set before them, in some cases that could be hours away, days away, sometimes it could be years away, but it's helping people understand we must keep an eye on that horizon no matter what obstacles or challenges that we're facing. That's something I've seen in critical intense environments being a really important trait for leadership. There's maintaining that sense of horizon now, I think a clear sense of assessing what they're coming up against. So there are times where you need to change and adjust what you're trying to achieve and there is times where you need to hold. But what was most important in that is being able to again, have the clarity and the wisdom to know the difference between when to hold and when to adjust and adapt. I think of a circumstance in a Rwandan pastor just recently, I was actually talking to who had just past a genocide. They'd only just achieved some level of stability. And he was preaching in his church and he was standing at the front and as he was looking around the people he knew, well, he realized he had both Hutu and Tutsi there in front of him sitting in his congregation. And here he is about to preach. And he froze and he decided, this is not a moment just to preach a sermon. This is a moment to lead my community. And so the step that he said is today we begin the lesson of forgiveness. And he started to lead that community and that congregation and then through that congregation, the community and what it is to reconcile and how first we were reconciled with Christ and now we must reconcile with each other. That's leadership.

Leigh Hatcher: And it must be said again, this is just not leadership in theory. This is leadership do or die.

Anthony Sell: This is lived out, absolutely lived out. And when you meet a man like that, you realize that deep sense of humility that's there as well.

Leigh Hatcher: You see, it's interesting, the landmark work of Jim Collins on level five leadership. He says the same thing that you've learned in humanitarian work in the midst of wars and disasters, humility is the greatest characteristic of true leadership.

Anthony Sell: Absolutely. Humility is so often I think humility is interpreted as something that's about weakness or weaknesses, when in fact it's not. It's actually about daring to believe that you can, in your leadership, help another person become all they are created to be to achieve the greatness that they have within them. Humility is about actually attending to the needs and desires of others in a way that is about the collective good and that's what I've seen in leadership in these contexts is a humility that is about not

necessarily stooping to the other or, or bowing lower than, but in fact seeing others raised up and that I think is a beautiful thing to watch when it's done.

Leigh Hatcher: A challenging thing.

Anthony Sell: Oh, very challenging.

Leigh Hatcher: And a threatening thing perhaps as well a threatening thing for the leader.

Anthony Sell: Yeah, very threatening because leaders are so often used to being out in front. The humility. Sometimes we'll find them at the back encouraging because that's the appropriate thing for the time. There is a time to be certainly at the front and being visible and we can talk about that in a moment, but there's also a time to be found amidst or even behind encouraging and shepherding. That's also true leadership.

Leigh Hatcher: Can you talk to us a bit more about your top characteristic courage? How have you seen that being played out and why is that the top one?

Anthony Sell: I think because all leadership there is a point that's defined your leadership. There's a point in a circumstance. There's a point in your journey as a leader where you will choose to step forward. Margot Waddell, a great sociologist talked about the difference between a bystander and somebody who stands by and a bystander is often someone in a critical moment say you've seen someone hit by a car, there'll be a circle of people that stand around that person. They feel helpless, so they're bystanders, they don't actually in any way involve themselves in the situation. Eventually someone will step forward, kneel down and start to attend to that person. That person is someone who stands by rather than a helpless bystander.

Leigh Hatcher: Get your hands dirty.

Anthony Sell: Exactly. And so courage is directly linked with the willingness to step forward and act. In leadership so often is - I can't see where we're going, I can't see what's going to happen next. I have a sense of where we've got to get to. Someone's got to move forward and they'll do that. And that's where I think we've seen great leaders defined throughout history.

Leigh Hatcher: Where have you seen this played out? So startling.

Anthony Sell: I had a huge privilege to get to know a man in Myanmar during the military junta at some of its worst points. He was a medical doctor, a very well trained, very skilled and a great teacher. He had been trained in the U S and had come back to Myanmar and as I was getting to know him, I learned that he'd actually been offered positions in illustrious universities in the United States like Yale. Huge opportunities to work in places like Singapore as a senior professor in the medical profession and as a teacher and yet, he was choosing to do tropical medicine in Myanmar and the essence and the reason for that was who will serve my people? Who will stand up, who will step forward again, there's that sense of a being helpless, bystander that steps away and says I'm going to go and pursue a career because I've worked hard like meritocracy. That right, that I've worked hard, I can go somewhere else. And then the benefits of that hard work, what he had chosen to do was keeping himself and his family in a country that was headed for very difficult circumstances, under very adverse conditions and serve the people dying of preventable illnesses.

Leigh Hatcher: It's impressive. It's courageous. It's also what you'd call servant leadership really.

Anthony Sell: Yeah, definitely. And that's a strong passion of mine I guess is that in leadership such a powerful example for us as a leader about how we can take a very strong position of guiding people through some of the darkest moments or through the most difficult challenges and doing so without necessarily ever using power. So we so often misuse power and sadly that is the theme of today. The discussion of today is the misuse of power and tragically as a leader, it's something I've done too many times to count and here is a moment where we're shown a different model of leadership that says it's not about power, it's actually about what you're trying to see achieved in other people.

Leigh Hatcher: It's so counterintuitive.

Anthony Sell: Very counterintuitive.

Leigh Hatcher: But you say it works.

Anthony Sell: I believe it works. I've seen it work. I've seen it work particularly in the circumstances I've had the privilege to witness where leaders have not taken control. They have not taken power to be the way in which they would achieve their goals or their objectives. They've taken the privilege of actually understanding what other people are trying to achieve and working with them and coalescing those people around a common goal.

Leigh Hatcher: You spoke about the guy in Myanmar, it's worth pointing out that when we talk about leadership in these contexts, it's not just men.

Anthony Sell: No, absolutely. Some of the most profound examples I've seen are women. I had the privilege in Bangladesh, I was sitting with a group there that had had the opportunity to be a part of our programs. Rural Women, often no numeracy, no literacy whatsoever, and this is the case in this particular women's situation where she had the opportunity to get some basic numeracy and literacy. She had the opportunity to be connected with other women and in that process, something sparked in her and she actually applied herself very, very heavily to learning the written language of Bangla Language, which is a complex language to learn and to write. Not only she'd done that, she began to produce poetry. Poetry is important for that culture because it told stories, gave her a language where she could talk about the need for change, changing people's attitudes toward women, change toward the circumstances in which they were living in, and so she was able to use the written language and poetry to lead other women and to inspire other women. So to go back to that group five years later and be handed a self published book on poetry from a woman who the last time I met was illiterate, is incredibly powerful.

Leigh Hatcher: What a wonderful thing. From your real life experience, what are some of the things that are transformational leader should not do Ant?

Anthony Sell: I think it's the opposite of a lot of what we've been talking about. Don't give into ego and pride. I mean that's the most easiest thing to do is that when we're threatened, we go to our defenses and often our ego and our pride is triggered in those moments and they're ugly moments. Certainly I've had those moments that you wish you could take back.

Leigh Hatcher: I sure have seen those.

Anthony Sell: I think the other is don't over estimate your abilities. Too often leaders will feel the responsibility to be everything when simply you're not. Sometimes it's about acknowledging your weaknesses, where people will respect you most rather than always demonstrating your strengths. I think they feel safer with you. I think obviously don't neglect relationships. Really important. Not Relationships for the sake of getting something done. Relationships because people are valuable.

Leigh Hatcher: Yes.

Anthony Sell: Don't neglect empowerment. I think again, leaders that we are used to and look at the history of leadership, it was about, certainly from the sort of seventies onwards, leadership became about competence and power and directing people. But I think what we're doing is now coming full circle on what people are looking for in leadership is to be empowered by their leader, never dominated but always directed by their leaders and I think that is really critical for good leadership.

Leigh Hatcher: So what are the character traits that you've observed in affective and impactive transformational leadership?

Anthony Sell: Some of the character traits I've seen are certainly what we talked about before. Humility, patience, wisdom, which is about timing, knowing the timing of things. Discernment. They're good at discerning what is coming at them and discerning what needs to happen. There's times where certainly we need to be agile. There's times where they need to be clear minded about their values and purposes and what their objective is and holding fast to that and being quite dogged about it, but here are also times where they need to be able to stop and take on the feedback of those around them and realise, no, we need to be agile here. We need to shift in what I believe was the right direction. Admitting that you're wrong is so incredibly difficult, particularly under pressure. When you think that by being wrong, it's somehow going to undermine your leadership. It's another thing to actually acknowledge, yes, I was wrong, but I've understood now where we need to go and then once again, taking lead there. So often leadership is doing what needs to be done or it's putting people in motion. That's what true leadership is. It's the difference between a spokesman and a leader is a spokesman simply talks about what has to happen. As if they talk about it enough they will create it as a truth, but in fact it's not a truth. It's not until they actually put people in motion that they become a leader. When people follow them, when people move with them, people are ready to realise that they are great at what they are doing, but it takes a leader sometimes to realise that in them.

Leigh Hatcher: Just to wrap up, you've already given us a couple of very powerful real life examples. Can you give us one more?

Anthony Sell: I got to witness an incredible moment of leadership. I was in Nepal we were doing a long term program there that was going to start, a very long term program, a significant investment in this particular area and it was going to focus again on on women from marginalized people groups and one of the people groups there is actually part of the caste system was a Dalit people. Now the Dalis in South Asia are the lowest castes, so they are normally people

that would be known as untouchables and they can never rise above being toilet cleaners or street cleaners. That's their lot in life is that caste. Now this woman who was leading this design workshop is in the community. So we're talking about all the political leaders, they're community leaders, business leaders, school teachers, right through to community groups all in one area for this design workshop because most of our design we do is in the community listening to the community about local solutions and building those local solutions. And this woman got up and said her full name and I remember hearing a bit of a gasp and the reason for that is her full name identified her as a Dalit woman. Now, that means in Nepal you're Dalit and you're a woman and you're young. She was essentially considered youth, under 25, would put you into three different marginalized groups and here she was leading this entire process and I can remember sensing, she's quite nervous, but there was something that was beyond that nervousness, which is that courage manifest in her where she was saying, I will nail this. She had done the preparation for it and she executed a brilliant workshop and what most people were saying was kind of, you could hear the murmuring of kind of shock of here is this Dalit woman, a young woman doing an incredible job leading political leaders, leading the entire communities through a process of design of a new project. And when I spoke to her later she said, this was my opportunity to speak for my people.

Leigh Hatcher: And they followed?

Anthony Sell: And they followed. She ran a three day workshop where she ran most of it. It was extraordinary to watch, but I could see that she worked incredibly hard and it had little to do with herself and everything to do with the Dalit people that we're going to be affected by that program.

Leigh Hatcher: What a powerful story.

Anthony Sell: Incredible story.

Leigh Hatcher: And this conversation and many others. This is at the essence of this whole series, this podcast series. Great stuff

Anthony Sell: Thanks Leigh.

Leigh Hatcher: If you'd like more information on transformational leadership, you can subscribe to receive useful articles and news from Transform Aid International. It's offered to any business leader who wants to grow their business, give purpose to their people, and make a

transformational impact on global poverty. Head to our website,
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