

Case Study: Srs. Susan, Beth & Joan

Sisters Susan, Beth and Joan are the elected leaders for their congregation. They have been in office for about ten months. In addition to dealing with expected responsibilities, they have had to cope with some unexpected and challenging issues as a new team—a fire in one of their residences and several issues about sponsorship in one of their institutions. As a group, they find themselves overworking, harried and currently experiencing increasing conflict among themselves. Free time or leisure time seems to have disappeared. In reality, the way they are living is controlling them and they are not living a balanced life.

Recently, Sr. Joan decided to ask the group to talk about how and why perpetual busyness seems to have taken over their lives. Each of the sisters shared what was behind her overworking: expectations, especially to do and be perfect, thinking that working harder and longer will help address the many issues they are facing, a reluctance to ask for help so as to avoid appearing weak or overloading others, pressure to be productive, and technology (cell phones, laptop computers and PDAs). Each of the team shared how technology has made it harder for her to relax because it enables her to be doing something every moment. Through this sharing, they began to realize what Sr. Janet Ruffing proposed in an article on business—“that the real root of busyness lies within each person, that it is a state of mind and a habit of the heart rather than merely the result of the number of tasks to be accomplished.”

Because each of them is

committed to do her best to serve the congregation and also live a balanced life, they agreed to think about what they might do differently. Sr. Susan found a poem called *Listen* by A. Davis that someone had shared with her in her previous ministry. She was touched by its content and realized that some of their difficulties are because they have really stopped listening to one another. Instead, when they meet, they tend to offer solutions or advice or try to talk one another out of their feelings in order to keep focused on the tasks at hand.

Sr. Susan realized that they needed an alternative mode of paying attention to one another so that each of them would really be heard. She proposed that they take some time out from all of their tasks and activities and learn how to listen and attend better to one another. In the book of poetry, *Leading From Within*, Sr. Susan felt affirmed when she read that leaders need to stop listening to fix, advise and solve, but rather they need to slow down so as to really hear what others are trying to say. The team realized that if they listened better to one another, they would then better listen to their sisters and to others in their sponsored ministries as well.

Sr. Susan proposed a creative way to slow down and listen to one another at deeper levels by using poetry. The team decided to follow the suggestions from *Leading from Within* to help them truly hear each other. Namely, they needed to select the right poem and then choose questions that invite deep listening. Sr. Beth suggested that they reflect and share on *The*

Way It Is by William Stafford. She selected this poem because it dealt with change and because of the thread image.

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see. While you hold it you can't get lost. Tragedies happen; people get hurt Or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread.

After reflecting on the poem, the team had a profound experience when they listened to one another respond to these questions: what are some threads—personal beliefs and convictions—that you hold onto in your life and work? What helps you hold onto them? What makes it difficult to hold on? What inner resources serve to sustain you? Does this poem in any way relate to being in leadership?

These questions not only helped the team members to engage with the poem but with one another. It helped the team members to get in touch with who they are and how they want to be with others. They agreed with Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner, the editors of *Leading From Within*, that poetry helped them make important connections, examine their beliefs, stay grounded and renew their hearts. They felt energized and agreed with Margaret Wheatley that “real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about.”

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