



# What's the shelf life OF A LEADER?

By Dr. Randall Spence

We all are well aware that groceries, medicine and a host of other things have a shelf life. Typically an expiration date on the packaging clues us in to when something will go bad. If you're like me, especially when it comes to things like milk and bread, I always look for the expiration date and choose the one that will last the longest.

Like milk and bread, I believe that we as leaders also have an expiration date. If you believe in divine calling and that God has a will for our lives and ministries, then perhaps you will agree with me that there is a time "to come" as well as a time "to go." Over the course of my life I have held many roles: associate pastor, senior pastor, CEO of a long-term healthcare organization, and I am currently a state minister. In every one of these positions, there were powerful calls to come and also distinct calls to leave. Knowing both when to come and when to go is one of life's greatest challenges.

Deuteronomy 34 tells the story of Moses' death. Verses 10-12 say:

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to the whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. (NIV)

Thus ends the story of Moses, the greatest leader Israel has even known. We then move into Joshua 1 where Moses protégé, Joshua, assumes leadership of the people. Joshua 1:1-2 says:

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aid: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land and I am about to give to them—to the Israelites." (NIV)

Consider what the story is telling us. As great as Moses was, with no one to call his equal in leadership, God still told Joshua, who has to fill Moses' shoes, "Moses my

servant is dead.” These words were likely not to inform Joshua of Moses' death, but rather to say to him, “You are the man.”

As we look at the stories of Moses and Joshua from the perspective of time, we see that Moses served the Lord and the people of God as the Great Deliverer. Then as we look at Joshua we see that he served the same as the Great Conqueror. While both men were the leaders of the Israelites, both also served a particular role for a particular time. Or, as Mordecai said to Queen Esther, “Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)

So how do we know when it is time our to leave? How do we know when our shelf life in a particular role and ministry has expired? I am currently researching this very concept for a piece I'm writing with two other pastors. Although we're approaching its completion, it's not quite finished. However, I would like to share with you some of our key findings:

### **All organizations change.**

As organizations change so does the kind of leader needed. Does the organization need a visionary leader who can lead them to new places? Or does the organization need a manager who is a great problem solver or who can help get the organization in order? The answers to such questions determine the kind of leader needed “for such a time as this.”

Has the ministry you currently serve changed to the extent that it needs a new kind of leader? Are you more of a manager but the ministry now needs a visionary to take it to a new level? How well does your leadership wiring fit your ministry at this moment in time? If they were looking for a leader today given these answers, would they choose you? Would you go if they did?

### **Few leaders can sufficiently change themselves to lead an organization through multiple stages.**

This is not a criticism of anyone's ability but a statement of reality—organizations change and leaders have a hard time changing. For example, I am more of a visionary leader who functions best at 30,000 feet. One assessment I took recently said that I best serve an organization as a pioneer. Pioneers are those who attempt to go where no one has gone before and blaze new trails for others to follow. I'm in my sweet spot when I'm able to create and bring new ideas. However, if you put me in a management role where I must give close supervision and attention to details, I will most likely fail. It's not who I am; it's not how I'm wired, and it's not God's first and best place for me. That's called being honest.

### **We all have a certain competency level.**

There is danger in always trying to function at a level where we don't have sufficient competency, gifting or equipping. You don't want me working on your car, building your house, and certainly not doing your surgery. Neither do you want me to be the

President of the United States. I think I have a pretty good feel for my level of competency and if the ministry I serve grows to a point where I think it has outgrown me, it is a good indicator that my shelf life has expired and that for the good of the ministry as well as my own, I need to move on.

### **Know when to move on.**

One of the fears with which I have lived is that of not knowing when I should move on. It feels right to me to move on at the height of ministry as opposed to when heading down hill. To that end in my last pastorate I chose two men in the church whom I loved and trusted and took them to lunch with an agenda. My agenda was for them to observe my ministry closely with the question, “Has his ministry peaked?” I made a covenant with them that if either one of them felt the answer was “yes” that they would, as my brothers and friends, come to me and tell me. I want to be the first to know when my shelf life has expired, not the last. I would rather ride off into the sunset while many if not most think it too soon rather than when the word on the street is, “I’m glad he’s gone. He should have gone a long time ago.”

By being proactive I was protecting myself and protecting the church from the tendency to get comfortable and ignore telltale signs that the time is up.

“Moses my servant is dead.” Harsh but true words. My hope and my prayer for me as well as you is that we will seek helpful truth and honesty from others rather than blind comfort and praise.