

## *Moving from Vision to Action to Results*

### **Africa Regional Leadership Conference, Nairobi, Kenya**

In mentoring church leaders, we often focus on the joy of leadership. It is true that individuals in leadership positions large or small have the potential to influence change and impact people. This is rewarding, and we are energized. We experience joy! A vision captures us. Growth and expansion will result. Surely it is right. Everyone will agree! We will move ahead. The world will be changed. And we are grateful!

It has happened to many of us this week. A new vision has come to us for the people we serve. A renewed passion for growth and effectiveness in our ministry has gripped us. And we are energized and committed to making it happen! We are happy and a smile is on our face!

We don't talk as much about the pain in leadership. This pain can be illustrated by me standing with outstretched arms. In one hand, I hold tenaciously to the vision I believe God has given me for my assignment and responsibility. I believe it is the right action to take, policy to adopt, direction to pursue, or goal to embrace.

However, pain comes when the other extended arm holds firmly to "reality" - the situation or context in which I work. Our reality may include the circumstances such as finances or facilities which seem to dictate what can and cannot be done. Our "reality" is often the people or followers who must embrace the vision if what is dreamed is to move from vision to action to results. Most of these brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we work are not at this conference! And we are stunned when those with whom we work reject the vision that is cast or challenge the vision as it is presented. And we are SAD.

The tension in holding on to our vision of the future and the reality of the present situation often produces pain. If we relax one arm and let go of the vision, we drift along with no direction. If we hold to the vision and let go of the people, we are known as leaders without followers...and nothing happens.

In holding, intentionally, to both vision and reality the possibility exists for leaders to move from vision to action to results. And with this intentionality comes both joy and

pain for the leader.

Why? Sooner rather than later, Christian leaders are jolted when we experience this reality: good and godly people, including a younger generation of leaders in the church, often differ on how to reach mutually desired goals. Sometimes, these good and godly people COLLIDE...and a faith community is divided, the kingdom of God suffers and we "...give the devil a foothold" in our communities of faith (see Ephesians 4:27).

When this happens, the pain in leadership is even more intense.

I have come to see that these collisions occur, not necessarily because of good or bad ideas, noble or sinful goals, or right or wrong solutions. Rather, good and godly people most often collide over vision and values, programs and plans, worship and witness of the faith community. We are caught in the middle of a divided group of Christians over where we should be going (vision), and how we are going to get there (values).

And in the midst of these painful situations, we ask ourselves, as leaders, these probing questions (asked in Chapter One):

- Is it possible, in these situations, to live and work together as Christians so that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?
- If "in Christ, all things are made new," then how does our relationship with Christ inform and guide us in the way we lead in these painful encounters?
- In the midst of these conflicting situations and seemingly irreconcilable expectations placed on us, what does it mean, really mean, to lead a divided faith community with the mind of Christ?
- How does our testimony of holiness of heart and life transform the way we both mentor others in the Christian faith and model before them a vibrant, maturing Christian life?

These questions frame my remarks to you about leading others and moving a faith community from vision to action to results. Through answering these questions, I began to cultivate the spirit of holiness needed to guide a faith community, particularly in challenging times. I have grown in my understanding of what it means to live and lead with "*the mind of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 2:16). And with this passion, I continue to learn about the movement from a vision of the leader to action and results by the entire faith

community, particularly in times of conflict and collision.

In light of the realities we face, I want to share with you seven anchors to hold us steady as faithful Christian servant leaders (Fairbanks, 2016). Anchors to provide balance for us as we grasp firmly to our vision of the future and, at the same time, seek to move the church, district, field or region to action and desired results.

### **Anchor #1: SPEAK GRACEFULLY**

**Issue: Watch the words we speak.**

**Principle: Words we speak can bless or “destroy” people.**

*“For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,”* so Jesus states in Matthew 12:34b. The words we use as leaders impact those with whom we work as we either: encourage or discourage them; lift them up or put them down; speak positively or negatively about them; reflect cultural sensitivity or cultural “blindness” to them; focus on “them” or focus on self.

I often ask myself: how do others feel when they leave my presence? Stronger or weaker? Larger or smaller about themselves? Confident or “scared”? Understood or misunderstood? Affirmed or manipulated? Blessed or “destroyed”?

Remember, the words we speak to those with whom we work, especially those who differ and even collide with us, can bless them or destroy them. Choose to bless them!

### **Anchor #2: LIVE GRATEFULLY**

**Issue: Comparison is the root of inferiority.**

**Principle: “Don’t cry -- be grateful.”**

Comparison is pervasive in our society – in the workforce, the family, the local church or region, in our communities and particularly within ourselves. We can feel good about ourselves – our gifts, talents and abilities – until we compare ourselves with the other people’s gifts, talents and abilities. We can believe our co-workers are adequate for the jobs we give to them until we compare their work – creativity, innovation, energy, collegiality – with others.

Comparison can rob us of joy, relationships, confidence and peace. In the process, it

saps our energy and drains our enthusiasm. Comparison can transform us from being a delightful leader or local church pastor into a preoccupied, dejected, negative and disgruntled individual that other people only endure. What is the antidote to comparison? Three profound biblical qualities:

Gratitude! Thankfulness! Appreciation!

We can choose to accept the people and provisions God in His wisdom has given to us. We can choose to work to bring out the best in others by seeing the best in them. In every situation, we can choose to be grateful, believing that God is in the midst of all we are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Gratitude is the life-giving antidote to the negative impact of comparison. Remember: Don't cry over what you don't have; be grateful – in all things – for what God has provided. Cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

### **Anchor #3: LISTEN INTENSELY**

**Issue: Seek first to understand.**

**Principle: Understanding, not agreement, is the key to conflict management.**

Believe that “good and godly” people can have honest and intense differences. After 30 plus years in higher education administration, I can tell you that good and godly people sometimes collide over vision and values. And you have similar testimonies!

This is why I have come to see that theological vision (what I believe about people / what I “see” in them) precedes organizational vision (what I want for the church, district, field or region). We pray for spiritual eyesight to really ‘see’ the people with whom we work.

In conflict situations with good and godly people, I have learned to listen for two growth-inhibiting questions: “Why me?” “What if...?”

As a leader, I may be a good administrator. However, I must be a great listener. I can listen for understanding. And listen for what is said. Also, I need to listen for what is not said. Listening to the people with whom I work values them. They deserve to be heard. They may have the spiritual gifts needed to move the vision to action. Remember, understanding, not agreement, is the key to conflict management.

### **Anchor #4: FORGIVE FREELY**

**Issue: Be proactive in extending forgiveness.**

**Principle: A spirit of forgiveness transforms and empowers leaders.**

One of my profound life lessons in leadership is this: forgiveness has little to do with the external environment around me, and everything to do with my internal condition! Extending forgiveness does not wait for the other to request forgiveness. Remember the example of Jesus on the cross: *“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:34).

Was Jesus naïve? Did he really believe that those who were killing Him did not know what they were doing? No! Did Jesus believe that by extending forgiveness, those who were slandering Him and hurting Him would cease their activity? No!

Jesus was not going to permit what others said against Him or the evil they did against Him to create bitterness or resentment within Him and thereby create a rupture in the relationship with God His Father. It simply was not worth it! *“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:34).

Extending forgiveness frees me from bondage to the other person. Too often, we permit persons who have offended us to control us. Remember, a spirit of forgiveness transforms and empowers leaders.

#### **Anchor #5: LEAD DECISIVELY**

**Issue: Christian leaders combine deep humility with intense resolve.**

**Principle: Our Christian testimony is reflected in and through the way we make and implement decisions.**

It is in the tension within a faith community between our preferred future and the present reality that our decision making as leaders most often takes place. It is in this context that we live, work, and lead. If holiness of heart does not reflect itself in these situations where good and godly people differ over vision and values, our holiness testimony is only doctrine and not a Life within us!

The Spirit of God within us and among us empowers us to take the “next steps” necessary to make decisions and to achieve the preferred results desired by the Body of Christ.

By now, you have heard me speak of the critical importance of RESPECT for our brothers and sisters with whom we labor as we pursue the biblical mandate to “*Go...and make disciples...*” (Matthew 28:19). You have heard me discuss respect for our co-workers through:

The words we speak;

The life of gratitude expressed for them;

Listening intently to them and valuing their perspective; and

Forgiving them freely even as we desire for them to forgive us when our actions are not Christlike.

Respecting our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially those who differ – even collide with us – is at the heart of what it means to lead with the Mind of Christ. In these times of conflict over vision and values, decisions will need to be made – even when continuing differences exist. And, in these times, we will lead – lead decisively – but from our knees and often with a weeping heart! Again, at some point in our leadership responsibilities, decisions have to be made. Decisions made after prolonged individual and collective prayer. Decisions made with fierce resolve and deep humility.

Pastors are the catalyst for evangelism, discipleship, change, and action in the local congregation. If leaders are to move from the preferred vision to achieved results, careful attention must be given to the leadership roles of:

Dreaming and planning;

Organizing and administering;

Motivating and encouraging;

Evaluating and reviewing.

Let’s focus for a few moments only on the critical leadership function of dreaming and planning. Christian leaders, by God’s grace, plan for things to happen. These leaders:

are deciders rather than drifters;

know where they are going, and how they are going to get there;

are results-oriented and not just activity-oriented;

are among the 3% who write down their growth goals;

pursue goal setting in the context of a broader planning strategy;

develop a mission statement;

dream great dreams;

are constantly involved in an ongoing analysis of their constituents;

establish growth goals;

are mission driven;

work hard at detailing programs and plans;

continually review and revise the planning strategy for growth; and

expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.

These “movers from vision to results” establish mission and vision-driven growth goals and find ways to transfer these dreams to their people. They understand that the acid test of **leadership is the transference of vision**. For them, personal and professional growth goals are prayerfully considered and thoughtfully written out.

“Leading for change is not the same as the exercise of power” (George McGreagor Burns, 1978). If I put a loaded gun to your head, I can get you to do things you might not otherwise do. However, I have not practiced leadership; I have exercised power. True leadership only exists if people follow when they have the freedom not to.

Especially in times of conflict over vision, leaders must lead. Decisions will need to be made – even when continuing differences exist! And, in these times, we will lead – lead decisively – but from our knees and with a humble heart!

We must avoid paralysis – waiting until everyone agrees with us – when decisions need and must be made. We seldom enjoy the luxury of having all the information we need before making necessary decisions. Sometimes, perhaps often, we must move ahead without everyone within the community agreeing with the vision or direction to be

taken.

To lead decisively with Christian humility demands that we continue to nurture and develop:

Listening and communicating skills;

Timing and processing skills;

Affirming and encouraging skills;

Asking and inquiring skills; and

“Gift” discernment and delegation skills.

The more I know about Christian leadership, the more I realize there is to know and learn. I am a committed lifelong learner and student of what it means to lead decisively with the mind of Christ.

Remember, the BIG question for Christian leaders: how can my ministry of Christian leadership enable others to fulfill their ministry to each other and their mission in the world?

#### **Anchor #6: LOVE DEEPLY**

**Issue: Value people, not power. (or position)**

**Principle: The evidence of leadership is seen in the lives of the followers.**

As leaders, you and I must keep remembering the many things we have in common with our colleagues and the values we have in common. Focus on the things that unite us, not divide us.

I often asked myself if I expressed appropriate appreciation, thanks and gratitude to MVNU faculty, staff and students? Are the missionaries, district leaders, and pastors with whom I work growing in the Christian faith as a result of my involvement with them?

This is my bottom line: I tried to enlarge my people’s vision about the work they were doing. I want them to see the big picture. I wanted to assist them in discovering how



they, in their particular assignments, fit into the grand scheme and purpose of the institution or region. I wanted faculty, staff, and students to feel valued in their work at the university. I truly sought to value people and progress, not power and position. I wanted to be an encourager of “Joshuas,” the people with whom I worked and lived.

The book, *Encouraging The Heart* (2003), by James Kouzes and Barry Posner tells us how to encourage the hearts of our co-workers:

- #1. Set Clear Standards (or Expectations).
- #2. Expect the Best.
- #3. Pay Attention.
- #4. Personalize Recognition.
- #5. Tell the Story.
- #6. Celebrate Together.
- #7. Set the Example.

Remember: the evidence of Christian leadership is seen in the lives of the followers.

#### **Anchor #7: PRAY EARNESTLY**

**Issue: Some issues are only resolved through intense prayer.**

**Principle: Become the change you desire to see in others.**

Prayer saturated goals and plans, written out and communicated often with passion, challenge the very best in results-oriented Christian leaders. They open up the doors to success in our seemingly impossible ministry assignment and mission calling. A goal is a dream with a deadline!

Especially in times of conflict over vision, leaders must lead. Decisions will need to be made – even when continuing differences exist! And, in these times, we will lead – lead decisively – but from our knees and with a humble heart!

How do we move ahead, decisively, in these painful situations while, at the same time, show Christian respect to those who differ with us? We move ahead -- decisively –

through:

Prayer, with them, for them, and for “me” as leader;

Collaboration, involving them when and where we can in the process; and

Gratitude, thanking God, and “them” for their gifts, talents, abilities and testimony of faith in Jesus as Lord.

In this spirit of humility and brokenness, we move ahead: confidently – believing that God is working in the midst of this difficult situation, and decisively, not with paralysis or uncertainty, but with the conviction that God has spoken His word of vision and direction. A conviction that He will continue to lead His people to action even though the circumstances or attitudes may not give evidence of His work at the present time. This is leading with the mind of Christ – leading decisively in the midst of complex and difficult situations.

Praying leaders know that we do not have the power to change others. Change can take place, however, with *us*! In the midst of experiencing honest and intense differences between good and godly people, the “pray-er” can be changed and transformed.

Let me summarize these leadership “anchors” that hold me steady as I seek to move the group for which I am responsible from a vision of the future to action and the preferred results.

- #1. I really want my words to be grace-giving, life-generating and inspiring to others and not discouraging, depressing and draining utterances.
- # 2. I really want to be known as a person who is forever grateful, regardless of the situation, believing that God is in the midst of everything I do and is working to bring good in every situation.
- #3. I really want to listen to and respect the people with whom I work, to understand them – and for them to understand me – even if we do not agree with each other.
- #4. I really want to initiate forgiveness when I have been offended because I don’t have the energy or strength to carry the heavy burden and guilt of an unforgiving spirit.

#5. I really want to lead decisively with deep humility even as I experience the pain of holding tenaciously to the vision while acknowledging the realities of my situation.

#6. I really want my relationship with others to energize them, to have a positive impact on their lives and to enable them, in some small way, to grow – become stronger – in their faith, their confidence in themselves and their competence at work as a result of our interaction in the home and on the job and with me as their leader.

#7. I really want to pray earnestly so that in the midst of conflict between the leader and led, what happens to both of us is transformative!

And, I urge every one of you to increasingly be a Christian servant leader in whatever work assignment He gives to you. Discover your own answers – inspired by God’s word and His Holy Spirit to this probing question, “If ‘*In Christ all things are made new,*’ (1 Corinthians 5:17), then how does my relationship with Christ transform the way I lead?”

Jim Collins (2001), in his book, *Good to Great*, talks about the critical characteristics of leaders. He speaks of humility and fierce resolve as essential for Level 5 or top leaders. I believe that whatever else you discover in Christian servant leaders you will find that they:

Speak Gracefully. They watch the words they speak.

Live Gratefully. They don’t cry, they are grateful.

Listen Intently. They seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Forgive Freely. They are proactive in extending forgiveness.

Lead Decisively. They combine clear vision, deep humility with fierce resolve.

Love Deeply. They value people, not power or position.

Pray Earnestly. They become the change they want to see in those they lead (Fairbanks, 2016).

I leave you with these questions: which one of these anchors do you need most right

now in your leadership assignment? As you experience the tension between the vision God has given you and the reality of your present situation, in which of these areas do you most need God to hold you steady? As you move from vision to results, what is your greatest need:

Speaking Gracefully?

Living Gratefully?

Listening Intently?

Forgiving Freely?

Leading Decisively?

Loving Deeply?

Praying Earnestly?

Be specific. Be personal. Be honest.

Another question. Which of these seven anchors is your greatest strength? Be honest with yourself and God. It's vitally important for us to affirm our strength even as we acknowledge our need. Build on your strength. Work on your need. Pray for that specific anchor you need and give thanks for the strength He has given to you as you lead your people from vision to action to results.

One more (really big) question. What new vision, big goal, or renewed passion has God given to you recently for yourself, your family, your work, your local church, your district, your country, or the region you serve?

For you to move from this new vision and renewed passion to appropriate action and desired results, anticipate the joy and the pain that will come as you return to your ministry and begin to implement your big plan. Are you ready?

Remember Philippians 1:27. *"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ."* This is the spirit of holiness. And remember this thought: Live and lead with the mind of Christ!