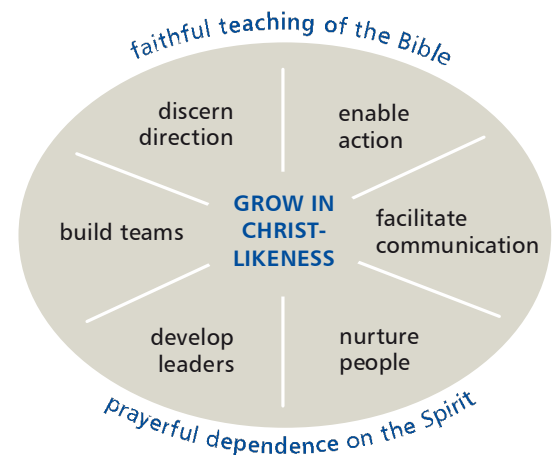


Enable action. This is the second in a series of themed issues of CL, exploring the various aspects of the CPAS 'leadership doughnut'.

from dream to reality



According to James Lawrence, only one thing is worse than having no dream – and that’s going through a lengthy process of discerning a vision, and then doing nothing with it! With this in mind, what could be more important than enabling dream-to-reality action?

An unattributed statistic states that three out of five visions aren’t acted upon. Despite the fact that I don’t know its source, it rings true with my experience. Just imagine a group of people:

Devoting themselves to eight months of hard work discerning God’s direction – and no change happens

Excited by a God-honouring picture of the future that chimes with what they’ve longed for – and no change happens

Investing time, talents and money – and no change happens.

The result? Disillusionment, discouragement and de-motivation.

The Book of Nehemiah provides a good case study of someone who saw clearly what needed to be done (1:1-11)

and then planned carefully how to do something about it (2:1-16). The prophet shared the vision with others (2:17-18), oversaw the work (3:1-32), and changed plans as situations developed (4:1-23). Let’s use this framework to explore how we can enable action.

Stage 1: Capture it

Express the big-picture sense of God’s direction in terms of practical ‘next steps’. This stage is about careful strategic planning, calling for diligent work by the leaders. Some ‘visionary’ leaders get bored at this point, feeling stifled by the need for detailed work. Indeed, they may already be on to the next grand scheme. This is where fellow leaders need to contribute firmly their gifts for working out a clear plan for change, otherwise nothing much will happen.

Leadership commentator Walter Wright notes: ‘Planning is the process of articulating a strategic vision of the future in a way that compels others to take ownership for that future and understand why their contribution is important.’ (*Relational Leadership*, Paternoster).

A good strategic plan will work on several levels, including:

Goals for which to aim (ideally these will be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timely).

Practical action points that move towards those goals in the immediate future.

A review process for checking on how we are doing and for making essential adjustments.



‘Having a vision of a better future is not enough. The leader must be able to inspire others towards that vision.’

Jeanne Porter



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Check the website for extra resources to help you make the journey from vision to reality. And go to page 22 for key resources on 'leading change'.



Stage 2: Communicate it

Once we are sure of God's direction, we need to communicate it so that everyone can easily answer three questions: where are we going, how are we going to get there, what is my role?

People should be *inspired* by a clear sense of overall direction and *informed* about how they can help achieve it through a clear plan. Such communication is an ongoing process, not a one-off event. Bill Hybels pictures vision as a bucket with a hole in the bottom. No matter how much you pour in, it will never stay full because, as he says, 'vision leaks'.

In short, clear, creative, compelling communication of the way ahead is essential to enabling action.

Here are three rules for good 'vision communication':

Embody it People have a right to see the vision being lived out, embodied, by their leaders. After all, even if others don't follow, those in leadership should be prepared to do all they can to realise the vision.

One-to-one Personal conversations, simply talking with people, are among the most effective ways of communicating direction. Sadly, many leaders ignore this approach. But wise leaders recognise that there are 'opinion makers' within a church. Such people aren't necessarily in formal leadership roles, but if you can get them 'on board', they will greatly help the communication process. In addition, one-to-one conversations are the most effective way of inviting individuals to play a part in the 'making it real' process.

One-to-many Films and plays abound with stirring speeches that change the course of history. And though ours may not be immortalised on stage or screen, they can have an equivalent impact on local history. I find the following maxim helpful. Tell as many as you can:

- as much as you can
- as soon as you can
- as often as you can
- in as many ways as you can.

But what if, despite careful and creative communication, people get 'stuck' and still aren't signing up for the proposed changes? Author Bill Donahue offers these helpful reflections:

People need to understand why **change is necessary**. If we only speak about the vision itself people may struggle to see its relevance. Somewhat counter-intuitively, leaders may need to stoke the embers of dissatisfaction. In short, while doing our 'vision casting', we need to do some 'problem-casting' as well. Nehemiah, interestingly, outlined problems very clearly. He understood that people need:

Assurance that current good values will be preserved. Let people know that the 'baby of values' won't be thrown out with the 'bathwater of necessary change'.

A simple, clear step-by-step approach to change. Of course, a sense of urgency helps as well.

Stage 3: Do it

We've got a clear plan, and people are inspired thanks to our good communication. There's no turning back as we move into implementation! Now it's time to think about equipping and experimentation.

Equipping It's not enough to tell people what to do. We may need to provide the tools for the job. This may involve teaching and practical training. One church decided to increase their effectiveness in personal faith-sharing. They provided biblical sermons on evangelism, inspiring stories of people coming to faith, and encouragement for people to share their faith. Great! But they forgot to provide any practical training.

Experimentation If we are going in a new direction we will need to take risks. Inevitably, some experiments fail. Therefore it helps if leaders can create a culture where experimentation, having a go, is actively encouraged – and where it's OK to get things wrong.

At this stage, leaders will need skills in four areas:

Culture creation – leaders are 'cultural architects', setting the tone for all that is valued in a church.

Problem solving – no process of implementation runs completely smoothly.

Managing change – arrival at the desired destination depends on careful management of change.

Handling conflict – change brings conflict and it's essential to be able to handle it well.

Stage 4: Celebrate it

Celebrating successes, large and small, along the 'change journey' lets people know that things are happening, provides motivation and – quite simply – helps to keep everyone's spirits up. We can celebrate through big parties, looking back at where we were and celebrating where we have got to. We can celebrate through small acts of gratitude; a thank-you card, a box of chocolates, an appreciative text message. What we celebrate gets noticed, so celebrate the right things.

Stage 5: Change it

What isn't evaluated isn't valued.

Evaluation provides us with the information we need to see how things are going and where change needs to happen. It helps with:

Alignment – ensuring that our energies and commitments are going in the right direction.

Appraisal – feedback ensures affirmation and accountability in all we do.

Accomplishment – spotting what has gone well so we can celebrate to clarify direction and maintain energy.

Contingency planning simply recognises that the unexpected happens, both good and bad. As church leader Leith Anderson says 'Changes are an inevitable part of any vision. Not everything can be anticipated. Leadership requires adaptation and innovation en route. So it is for all leaders in the implementation of all visions.'

What we set out with will inevitably change, and good leadership takes the initiative in seeking change through evaluation and responding wisely to the unexpected.

And finally...

Leadership is all about going somewhere. Good leaders not only discern the direction but ensure that action is taken to go in that direction. As Nehemiah shows us, when this happens extraordinary things follow: walls are built, enemies are defeated, people reconnect with the God who made them – and God's kingdom advances.

As with many things, this is best done not by an individual leader, but by a group leading together. And the next two editions of *CL* will explore how we develop leaders and build teams.