

James Lawrence

in the right direction



According to the dictionary, 'leadership' has Anglo Saxon roots linked to ideas of 'path, direction, route and way'. Leadership is about going somewhere. And, says James Lawrence, a primary responsibility of those in Christian leadership, whatever the level, is to help the people see where God is leading them.

Vision is 'the ability to see the future in a way that compels others to pay attention.'

Leighton Ford

Here are two brief stories about leadership. I was talking with a vicar about the four churches he oversees. Things were bubbling along quite well. People were coming to faith, growing in discipleship, connecting with their communities. Yet, some people had gently voiced a concern: 'Where are we going?'

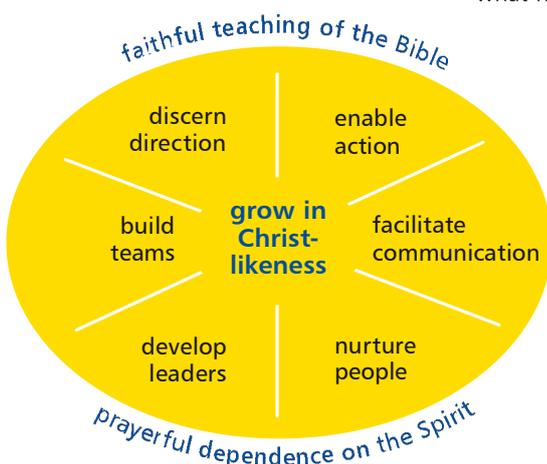
On another occasion, I was chatting with a helper in a church crèche. He knew that he wasn't simply 'baby-sitting' on his Sunday morning rota 'slot'. The crèche had a clear statement of purpose, a strong sense of direction, and an agreed process for getting there. No wonder the helper was motivated and energised by what he was doing.

Leadership makes a difference! And it is the leaders' responsibility to ensure things are going somewhere. Being clear about God's direction:

- draws people closer to God, because we draw closer to his will
- captures people's imagination, and inspires them to want to be a part of something
- unites people by helping decisions to be made around what God wants
- generates resources as people sacrificially give time, talents and treasure to follow where God is leading.

In short, discerning direction (discovering 'vision') may be the single most important responsibility of those in leadership.

How does this work out in practice? Here are some basic principles about direction/vision – you'll find a variety of related resources on pages 22 and 23.



This issue of CL is the first of a series themed on the 'segments' of the CPAS 'Leadership doughnut'.



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Check the website for a variety of extra resource material to help think through key issues of vision and direction.



Question 1: Whose is it?

Simple answer: God's. At the heart of Christian leadership is attention to God and where he is leading his people. Yet it is surprisingly easy for leaders to impose their agendas on those they lead, or for others to seek to impose their will.

Question 2: What is it?

Our experience is that nearly everyone has a vision for their church, a mental picture of what they would like it to be. To discover it, try this simple exercise.

Ask people to answer these questions:

- What would you like to see happen in the church over the next three years?
- What are the most frustrating aspects of churches you've belonged to so far?

Nearly every church person has an answer to these questions. Why? Because they have a mental picture of what they would like church to be. So our problem is not the absence of vision, but the presence of multiple conflicting visions! That is why it is so important to begin with question 1. If we think this is all about our preferences then those who speak loudest or have most power get their way. But if we are concerned with what God wants for his church, then it is about trying to discover his, not our, direction.

For this reason my working definition is as follows: 'Vision is a process of discerning God's kingdom-honouring preferable future based on an accurate understanding of current reality (including story, context and circumstances)'.

Question 3: Why do we need it?

Every group, church, organisation sometimes loses its way. Church leader Leighton Ford comments: 'Circumstances change. Values decay. People age and get fatigued. Systems become rigid. Purposes get lost.' Church history witnesses to the truth of this statement. From the earliest writings of Paul, many of which were to help churches attend to God's direction for them, through the ebb and flow of each successive generation, the Church has constantly needed to be reminded of whose it is and why it exists and therefore where it should be heading. Today is no different.

Question 4: How do we discern God's direction?

There are many ways of doing this, and the resources section on the CL website describes some of them, but at the heart of them all is the simple dynamic of comparing reality with an emerging ideal. For a local church this is about comparing where we are now with where God would like us to be.

Step 1: Start well

Ask a few questions at the start of the process. Is this the right step for us? Sometimes churches try to resolve an issue with a vision-discerning process that can't be resolved in this way. Make sure you define your terms so that you all know what you mean by words such as 'mission', 'vision', 'values', 'strategy'. Make decisions on how long you are going to spend on the process, the resources you are going to allocate to it, and how far ahead you are looking.

Step 2: Nurture the ideal

We do this mainly through studying God's word. Fortunately God has already made the mission of his Church very clear. The answer to the question 'Why does the church exist?' is captured in the great commandment (Mark 12:28-34) and the great commission (Matthew 28:16-20). This is a 'given'. The 'crunch' issue is discovering what this will look like in our area, and the answer needs to be nurtured by study of the Scriptures.

Step 3: Discover the reality

Many of us in leadership think we are in touch with reality. Research shows we often don't know it as well as we think! To discover the reality of our local and church situations, we will need a degree of objectivity. The direction for the future is found in the gap between the ideal and the reality.

Step 4: Formulate the direction

This process involves drafts, revisions, and eventually a clear and compelling statement of where we believe God is leading us over a certain period of time. The statement should capture people's imagination.

Step 5: Implement it

Only one thing is worse than no vision, and that is a vision that isn't implemented. Nothing is guaranteed to discourage people more than a lengthy and costly process of discerning God's direction, and involving excitement and commitment to the direction – and then nothing happening. In the next edition of CL we will look at how to implement a vision.

'Vision is a picture of the future that produces passion in people.'

Bill Hybels

Question 5: What is the role of the leadership?

Views vary. Some like the idea of an individual going up a mountain, hearing from God and coming back to tell the people which way they are going. The weakness of this approach is captured in the phrase 'ownership comes through involvement.' Generally the best process is one which includes people. This doesn't mean that the end product is somehow the lowest common denominator of what people would like. If done well, people will feel that 'together we have discerned where God is leading'. Such a process requires clear, thoughtful and creative leadership.

Moving on

Having a God-honouring direction is empowering. It not only inspires God's people, but transforms God's world, for ultimately the local church is the embassy of the kingdom of the God, and we are the ambassadors, called to show and share the faith in ways which make a difference to those around us. Those of us in leadership (of a church, a youth group, a cell group, the choir) have a responsibility to help God's people move towards God's purposes for the sake of God's world. Discerning God's direction is the process that helps that to become a reality.

'Vision is seeing tomorrow so powerfully it shapes today.'

Walter Wright