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## ten tips for discerning direction

In his book *Relational Leadership*, Walter Wright says: 'the first task of leadership is to articulate the vision of the organisation'. The writer of Proverbs underlined the need for it: 'where there is no vision, the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). And Rick Warren suggested that 'where there is no vision the people move to another parish'.

So in this month's *Lead On* we are offering the following ten practical steps to help you be increasingly confident and able to respond to the challenge for you and others to discern vision/direction. They are not in any particular order, and are obviously very brief. We pray God will use them to enable you in your leadership.

**1** The first tip must be to **have an agreed understanding of what vision is**. The language of 'vision', 'mission' and 'purpose' is sometimes confusing in that people use these words in different ways. Here at CPAS we understand vision to be a 'picture' of what might be. It changes over time (and so is not the same as purpose) and does not tell us how we will achieve the things we aspire to see (we call that 'strategy'). Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech was a vision speech – it painted a picture of the things he wanted to see happen. If you want a thumbnail definition, how about the following: 'a picture or description of what we would like to see happening in three years from now'?

**2** Secondly, remember that in seeking to discern direction we are wanting to know God's call upon us at any particular time. Our vision must be part of and derived from the *missio dei* in our community/city/region. It cannot be a vision that contradicts scriptural values or teaching. Vision will therefore always be determined in the context of prayer and scriptural study. **If you are talking vision but not preaching or praying for it ... start now!**

**3** A key role of leadership in the discerning of vision is to **define reality**. By this, I mean that it is important to be honest, accurate and even sometimes 'brutal' in telling things like they are. I remember working with a church to help them discern their vision and being told that the reason there were few young families in church was because houses in the area were too expensive for young families to buy. But the reality was there were two large and thriving state primary schools in walking distance of the church – so the reality had to be pointed out that their perceptions were wrong. (Interestingly, once this was rectified the church went on to discern a call to grow ministry amongst young families – which it did with terrific results).

**4** It's easy to think of Moses and Joshua and Paul as visionary leaders and come to the conclusion that discerning direction is about an individual with an arresting vision or a mountain-top experience. Clearly God does give individual leaders aspirations and nudges by his Spirit – but it is my observation that very often God enables us to discern his call in more collaborative ways.



In his book *Leadership Next*, Eddie Gibbs talks about the role of leaders in 'incubating vision'. This is a wonderfully evocative phrase and underlines the need for leaders to be focused on and nurturing vision – without assuming they are the sole depositor of it. He writes: 'The leaders role in developing vision is first and foremost to lead the faith community in seeking the mind of God.' This is an entirely biblical concept and the kind of thing we read about in Acts 11 where the apostles discern together that God is calling them to minister to Gentiles as well as Jews.

So my tip is for leaders to ask the question: what might it mean in practice to be **'nurturers' of vision rather than pre-packages providers of it?**

**5** My next tip is that discerning vision is helped by the **asking of inspiring and focused questions**. My observation is that people sometimes find questions like 'what is God saying to us?' difficult to answer. So maybe ask your PCC or ministry leaders to imagine God offering you a watering can full of his Holy Spirit – and ask them to decide where and on whom would they sprinkle it in your town, village or community.

Make sure that the questions you ask 'work' for the context in which you are trying to discern God's vision. In a rural context it might be helpful to ask organic questions like: 'what activities should we be growing at this time – and what should we be leaving fallow?'. In a more metropolitan or corporate context it might be possible to ask: 'what are BHAGS (big hairy audacious goals) God might be calling us to?'

**6** Next tip – make sure you are **reading good books** about discerning vision. I have found the following particularly helpful over the years:

- *Advanced Strategic Planning* (Aubrey Malphurs, Baker)
- *Growing Leaders*, chapter 10 (James Lawrence, BRF).
- *The Leadership Challenge*, chapter 5 (Kouzes and Posner, Jossey-Bass).
- *Relational Leadership*, pages 83-102 (Walter Wright, Paternoster).

**Here are three tips about the 'process' of discerning direction:**

**7** Firstly, make room for **revelation**. The call to Abraham, Moses and Paul came through an 'in breaking' of God. How do you make space for God to break in? How are you making it possible to listen to God

and be open to him. Has your PCC or leadership team spent an away day praying? Have you invited church members to send you an email saying what they think God might be calling you to?

**8** Secondly, ask what **aspirations** God has already put in the hearts of people in your church. We must not assume that there is no vision in people's hearts – indeed it's my experience that God sometimes plants his thoughts and aspirations into the hearts and minds of some of the most unlikely people. So how about a fish and chips supper where your PCC (or even the whole congregation) are asked to share what they would love to see happen in the life of the church (don't use the word 'vision', don't ask 'how will it happen' and don't rule anything out!). Listen for God-given aspirations.

**9** Thirdly, try and **'map' the needs of your community**. Surely, God's call or direction for us is to be 'kingdom builders' where we are ... which means we need to ask questions of the needs around us. Try walking around the streets and praying that God will point out the people and places where he longs to minister. Try reading your local newspaper to see what is highlighted as a local problem. If you are brave enough, try knocking on front doors and asking people 'if God was to show up around here what do you think he would do?'. From these kind of activities you will be able to discern the needs of your local area.

Then, put these three into a 'melting pot' and ask where they overlap and how they shape God's call or direction for you?

**10** Finally, set up a group that can sift, review and prayerfully work out how to take the visions offered and see what might be done. Men and women whose opinions you and others trust who can handle carefully the separate visions offered and see if there are some actions and strategies that emerge. Be transparent about this, and don't promise that every idea will happen! Don't forget that vision alone doesn't get you to where God is calling you. It has been suggested that **90% of visions don't become reality because leaders fail to plan (or develop strategies) and implement (or follow through)**. Leaders must encourage and steer these things also. Don't drop the baton before the race is over.

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