

The Vision Thing

BY GEORGE BARNA

Let's get one thing straight from the start. If you want to be a leader, vision is not an option; it is part of the standard equipment of a real leader. By definition, a leader has vision: What else would a leader lead people toward, if not to fulfill that vision? Understand that to be a *Christian* leader, the vision toward which you lead people must not be a vision of your own making, but a vision God gives to you.

So what is vision? It is a clear mental portrait of a preferable future, communicated by God to His chosen servant-leaders, based upon an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances. Granted, definitions are dry as sawdust — this one is no exception — but they are vitally important for the purposes of clarification, insight and for framing one's understanding. Take a moment to ponder each of the characteristics embedded in this definition.

VISION IS A CLEAR MENTAL PORTRAIT OF THE FUTURE

Vision is "clear," suggesting that the leader who possesses such vision knows exactly what he wants to achieve and what the end product will look like. This clarity permits a leader to be confident and decisive.

Vision comes in the form of a "mental portrait," indicating this is a picture that exists in the mind's eye of the leader. This concept of vision may seem mystical and "out there," but to those who possess it, vision is as tangible as your tax bill. Vision focuses on what does not yet exist, but should — a "preferable future."

The term "preferable" is key, because it mandates change. Vision is about creating something new, not in disdain for the past, but built upon the foundation of the past and the present, emerging with a reality that is better than that which is currently available. When fully enacted, vision brings us closer to our ideals.

VISION COMES FROM GOD

True vision comes from God. When we personally conjure up a vision of the future, it is fallible, flawed and limited; God's vision is perfect in every way. Only He knows what is best for us; only He cares enough about us to call leaders to the fore and instill His vision within them, for the benefit of all. Notice that the vision originates with God, and He presents it to "chosen" people. In other words, His vision is a gift, and it is given when He is ready to give it, to whom He wishes to give it. His choice of recipients are "servant-leaders": those He has called to be leaders of people, but who maintain hearts and demeanors of servants. Servant-leaders are not doormats, but those who serve constituencies by providing godly, effective leadership. Their leadership is their service, in the same way auto mechanics may serve by repairing the broken down cars of single mothers.

The definition also informs us that the vision God provides will always be consistent with the context of the leader, hence its relationship to "an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances."

Vision, then, is a view of the kind of world God wants us to live within, a world He can create through us if all those He has called as leaders would lead according to the guidance provided by His Spirit. Once you grasp the vision, you will never be the same. If you are a true leader and truly Christian, the world will never be the same either, because you will be totally sold out to that perspective of what the world could, should and will be as a result of that vision.

Leaders, contrary to popular thought, are actually a rare commodity in America. My research suggests that fewer than one out of every five people is a leader by nature; perhaps one out of ten adults is a leader by calling and spiritual gifting. Most people want to be led, but they will not voluntarily follow someone they deem unworthy of their support. In essence, they will refuse to place their trust and future in the hands of an alleged leader who does not possess vision. After all, vision is a clear and compelling picture of a better tomorrow that inspires people to change, to get involved, to care and to do things that contribute to the common good. Who wouldn't want to be part of such a movement of humanity and Spirit? Or, to look at it from the other side of the coin, who wants to be devoted to a leader who is pursuing something less than the ideal?

Solomon gave us a precise understanding of the importance of vision: "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18, KJV). The NIV rendering is even more telling: "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint." In other words, unless the people have a definite sense of purpose, direction and parameters, they live according to their own choices and will — much to their own detriment.

LESSONS FROM POLITICS

The centrality of vision permeates leadership in every dimension of life, whether we discuss leadership within the family, within the Church, within public education or any other field. Because national politics touches each of our lives and because the media applies such detailed and unceasing scrutiny to those involved in the political arena, the world of politics provides the most accessible window through which we regularly see the importance of vision in leadership. In seeking reelection in 1992, George Bush ridiculed the media's constant quizzing about his vision for the nation's future, sarcastically noting he'd had enough harping about "the vision thing." He was defeated by an unknown challenger who appeared to provide such a vision — although it was at odds with the ideological preferences of the nation. People are attracted to those who have vision — even when that vision is not entirely consistent with their own inclinations.

The importance of vision is underscored by the change in Bill Clinton's own fortunes as the nation's political leader. As we write this chapter, we are entering the final few weeks of the 1996 presidential election. Clinton has had a huge lead over his Republican challenger, Bob Dole, ever since Dole became his party's nominee.

By all measures, Clinton should be an overwhelming favorite. During his first term in office, the national deficit has been reduced by 60 percent. Interest rates are low. Capital spending and accounts investment are up. Unemployment is low, thanks to the creation of 10 million new jobs since Clinton entered the White House. The "misery index" — a joint measure of inflation and unemployment — is at its lowest level in three decades. A majority of Americans say the president has done a good job with the economy. Forty-three percent say they are better off today than when he took office. Although Mr. Clinton's personal life and morals have been widely chastised, our surveys suggest that his morality is less important to the average voter than what the president will do for household finances and crime reduction: Remember, he "feels our pain."

Yet, regardless of the election's outcome, Americans are suffering from acute political malaise. Mr. Clinton is but one of many political leaders holding office today who have helped to create such universal disenchantment. Using the president as a means of explaining this sense of despair, Mortimer Zuckerman of *U.S. News & World Report* offered some insight.

"The reason is that he [Clinton] does not seem to project a positive vision of where he wants to lead the country. He has defined himself more by what he is against than by what he is for. His wanderings from one side of the political spectrum to the other have created a sense of uncertainty about who he is and what he stands for."¹

That analysis contains several insights: the need to constantly convey vision to followers; the necessity of providing a vision that relates to positive change; the need to remain ideologically (or, theologically) consistent; the importance of using vision to facilitate confidence among followers; the role of vision in defining what you, as a leader, represent.

BEING A REAL LEADER

Perhaps the most significant insight this critique brings to mind is this: The only justifiable reason to accept the privilege and responsibility of leadership is to help people accomplish the fruition of a vision from God. Those who wish to lead because they are gifted, because they are experienced, because they enjoy the power, because they have innovative ideas, because they love the attention, because they have been groomed for such service — these are dangerous people. Their motivations are inappropriate. Because a leader is a servant, and the leader's primary task is to provide the guidance people need to become more Christlike, those who seek positions of leadership for reasons other than fulfilling a God-given vision are not truly leaders.

Look again at Zuckerman's analysis of Mr. Clinton. At the risk of offending some readers — and I do not intend to do so — we must ask ourselves how many people in positions of ministry leadership the Zuckerman critique fits. We all know ministry figures who are superb at bemoaning the deterioration of cultural mores and personal values, the collapse of the family or the decline of biblical knowledge and lifestyles. How many of these figures offer practical and intelligent alternative courses of action for us to follow? How many of them place those concerns into the "big picture" of today's conditions and opportunities, inspiring us to rise above mediocrity and comfort to do that which is morally and ethically right, regardless of the cost? How many challenge us to evaluate our potential responses to circumstances by considering God's Word? How many refuse to play the victim of changing realities, but instead reflect a comfort about taking us to a better reality, no matter how difficult some of the steps toward that superior outcome might be?

Real leaders do more than simply point out problems; they articulate and involve people in real solutions. Those solutions, however, are indefensible unless they are based on true vision. Solutions that are not based on vision tend to be remedial in nature, akin to placing a bandage on a gunshot wound. True vision leads to holistic, consistent and transforming action. It results in neither temporary nor disjointed solutions. Vision brings victory.

¹ Mortimer Zuckerman, "Does He Still Feel Your Pain?" *U.S. News & World Report* (September 2, 1996): 64.

The presence of vision is one of the most accurate means of determining if a person is a leader or merely filling a position of leadership.

The equation is quite simple: no vision = no leadership. Many people dress like leaders, speak like leaders and have titles that suggest they are leaders. There is one inerrant measure of Christian leadership, however: does the person possess God's vision for the people he has been called to lead. Vision is a necessary (though by itself incomplete) requirement for authentic leadership.

GOD'S TRACK RECORD

As I was doing research for my book *Turning Vision into Action*, I had the opportunity to dissect the biblical accounts of the leadership provided by several dozen people. In examining the lives of people such as Joshua, Josiah, Nehemiah, Peter, Paul and Jesus, it became abundantly clear that each of them had a clear sense of vision they had gained from God. If you evaluate their stories closely, it is possible to describe the unique vision God gave to each of them.²

My exploration into the world of biblical visionaries also uncovered eighteen lessons about vision.³ This is not the place to reiterate those insights, except to suggest that if you are called by God to be a leader, an incredible track record has been accumulated for us by our predecessors in the Kingdom. By carefully studying how they identified the vision and how it affected their leadership, you can grow in some profound ways. One of the hall marks of God is that when He calls someone to lead people, He always provides that person with all the tools and resources necessary to be a great leader. Vision is one of those tools.

Among the insights I gleaned from an earlier book I had written concerning vision is that four primary factors are involved in discerning God's vision for your life and ministry.⁴ Briefly, those four aspects are:

- **Knowing yourself:** God cannot trust you with the leadership of His most beloved creation, nor with the wise use of His precious vision, unless you understand yourself inside out. Great leaders know who they are at the most intimate levels of self-knowledge. Anything less would render them dangerous.
- **Knowing God:** You are most useful in the unfolding of His kingdom when you are willing to be used for His purposes, in His timing, in His manner, to His glory. He will open your eyes to a captivating version of a future reality, one you may play a significant role in bringing to fruition, when you have gained intense intimacy with Him. You do this through prayer, through meditation, through fasting and through reading the Scriptures — especially those passages that model His relationship with historical visionary leaders.
- **Knowing your context:** God works through us within the context of human reality. If you are to be useful in shaping the future, you must understand the past and the present. This means getting a good grip on the community you have been called to lead within; the people who will be touched by, and taking part in the ministry endeavor you will lead; other Christian leaders God has also called to minister in your midst, albeit in different ways and with different (but invariably complementary and connected) visions; and your worldly competitors, who work on the basis of human vision and seek to distract people from the things of God.
- **Knowing good advice:** One of the benefits of working with others is that they may see things we cannot because we are too close to a situation. When it comes to the prolonged process of determining God's vision for our lives and ministries, it is easy to lose ourselves or our grip on reality in the process. Often, one of the most valuable assets on the vision-determination trail is to seek the counsel of a handful of people who intimately know you, God and your ministry context. As iron sharpens iron, they may well provide you with keen insight you are incapable of mustering in the midst of your vision quest.

Let me offer a few more bits of insight that might help you as you work through the vision development process. A hard pill for some followers to swallow is that God conveys His vision to leaders without asking His followers for their input! As a leader, you may wish to ask for people's input; but remember that the ultimate definition of the vision is from God, not your peers. They may play a role in helping to shape your thinking or perhaps the way you ultimately articulate or position the vision. Vision, however, is not determined by a two-thirds vote; it is not the result of consensus among a group of interested parties; and vision is not identified through a committee-based process.

² I did include what I thought might be a paraphrase of the vision of eight of the biblical leaders I described in the book, as well as the verses that seem to crystallize their vision. This information is located in chapter 3 of *Turning Vision to Action* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1996).

³ These eighteen lessons are located in chapter 4 of *Turning Vision into Action*.

⁴ A much more extensive discussion of the process of gaining God's vision is contained in chapter 6 of my book *The Power of Vision* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1992).

If God has called you to lead, perhaps the most vital and significant function you will fill is that of being the projector and the protector of the vision. The goal is not to become the people's most popular leader but to become God's most trustworthy leader. Leadership is not easy; it involves taking a lot of unfair, unnecessary and unfathomable hits. Sometimes you won't be able to tell your backers from your detractors (even with a scorecard!). In the end, although leaders receive a lot of applause and are frequently in the public eye, leadership is a lonely business. It is a wearing task. Gaining God's vision for the future is exhilarating. Putting it into practice in this fallen world is punishing. If you want to be a visionary leader, gird up for the battle.

THE NINE ACTS OF VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

If you want to be a visionary leader — which, incidentally, is a redundant expression because you cannot be a leader unless you have vision, and God will not give you His vision unless you are going to lead — nine sequential steps are related to maximizing your visionary leadership.

UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT

You won't get very far if you take the George Bush approach — pooh poohing the significance of vision without really comprehending its centrality and its power. You must understand the purpose of vision, its importance and impact, and its potential applications.

Vision exists to provide a link between mission and action. Contrary to a widely held misconception, vision and mission are not synonymous. Mission is a broad-based description of why you exist — your purpose for being. It defines the outer parameters of acceptable activity. Vision is much more specific; it details the particular direction you will pursue within the broad framework of your mission. Vision provides focus. To use a sports analogy, mission is the stadium in which you will play; vision identifies the sport to be played within the stadium. Vision, then, is a specific, detailed, customized, distinctive and unique notion of what you are seeking to do to create a particular outcome.

Vision is important because it provides guidance that makes you effective as a leader and influential as a team of people. I have discovered that the primary benefits of operating in concert with God's vision are that vision provides continuity with the past while building a superior future; it empowers people to do the work of God; it heightens people's commitments to their faith, their community of faith and their own sense of calling and self-worth; and it brings unity to God's people.

Vision is an indispensable tool as a leader begins building momentum for positive, life-transforming change. Vision becomes the core from which strategy and tactics are developed, culminating in a plan of action that people can implement and evaluate. A leader who has God's vision will use it in conversation, in conceptualization, in evaluation, in resource development — well, in just about every dimension of leadership activity. God's vision motivates people to get excited and to get involved. Obviously, vision is the kind of tool no leader can afford to be without!

UNDERSTAND THE CONTENT

A person who attempts to lead others without vision is simply playing a dangerous, arrogant game. Anyone who is called by God to be a leader must devote serious time, energy, study and spiritual commitment to discerning God's vision for ministry. The elements described in the previous section outline how to go about identifying the vision. Let me add an important caveat. Gaining the vision is simple, but it is not quick. I have worked with many great Christian leaders across America who spent months or years (literally) interacting with God to gain access to the vision. The amount of time invested in discerning the vision is not related to the person's experience, godliness or natural abilities. It is simply part of God's refining process for you. I firmly believe that God takes greater pleasure in the process of working with us to get the vision than He takes in us finally attaining it. Most visionaries admit that the process of seeking the vision brought them closer to God than they had ever been before. The process is every bit as important as the product; do not rush it.

OWN THE VISION

God has developed the vision for you, specifically. It fits your abilities, your context and your opportunities. He does not carelessly provide generic visions: each one is tailor-made to fit you, and you alone. That vision will empower you to accomplish great — sometimes miraculous things for Him. But you have to own the vision completely. It must be a perception of a coming reality to which you are totally committed.

Martin Luther King Jr. described it this way: "If a man hasn't discovered something he is willing to die for, he isn't fit to live." Ultimately, of course, you and I must be willing to die to self and to die for Christ. How do we objectively do that? By committing our lives to Him, giving Him full power and authority over our lives. This relates to our trust in

Him, and Him alone by His grace, for our spiritual salvation. For those of us called to be leaders, it means that we put ourselves on the line, every day, to see His vision for His people come to life through us. Are you willing to die for the vision God has entrusted to you?

MAKE IT REAL

Vision is not an ethereal, mystical concept; it is a practical tool. You must make the vision real. Because the purpose of vision is to help you lead people, this intimates that you must make the vision tangible and compelling not only to yourself, but also particularly to others.

The key to this process is creating a vision statement. This is a brief and memorable (but not trite) description of the vision. Choose the language carefully. Keep it to no more than two sentences, probably no more than twenty words: people won't remember more than that. Avoid technical or ecclesiastical terminology. Memorize it so that it not only flavors your thinking, but also is always at your fingertips should it be a useful addition to a conversation or other communication.

The following examples of mission and vision statements are provided to give you a feel for what we are talking about.

Ministry: Barna Research Group

Mission: To serve the Church through marketing research while remaining profitable. (NOTE: Barna Research is a for profit corporation.)

Vision: To provide current, accurate and reliable information, in bite-size pieces, at reasonable prices, so ministries can make better strategic decisions for ministry.

Ministry: Oakdale Community Church

Mission: To exalt God; edify the saints; equip believers to serve; evangelize the community; extend God's love to the believers.

Vision: To provide a safe and loving place where emotional healing occurs, culminating in an extensive network of affirming relationships.

PASS IT AROUND

For a leader to be effective, he must influence people. For that influence to happen, the leader must motivate people to act. It is the vision that will inspire them to sacrifice who they are, and to accomplish something that is not purely selfish. For this to occur, then, you must articulate the vision.

When should the vision be communicated to people? At every opportunity. For instance, senior pastors might relate the central message or theme of their sermons to the vision; include applications of the vision in their letters to congregants or articles they write for the church newsletter; raise the vision as an idea generator at planning meetings; evaluate the ministry in comparison to the vision; inspire visitors to the church with a motivating presentation of the vision as the heart of the ministry; prepare the budget in relation to the applications of the vision; and so forth.

How should it be articulated? By expressing enthusiasm, relevance and confidence. Whenever you have a chance to influence someone with the vision, exploit the opportunity. Realize that vision is most effectively caught not by mass presentations, but by example and through relationships. Sermons and other mass-event presentations can certainly raise people's awareness of the vision and perhaps intrigue them. My experience in studying the transfer of vision from the visionary to his followers, however, is that people are most likely to buy the vision when they have an intimate meeting with the visionary, or someone else who has wholeheartedly embraced the vision and has become an evangelist for it.

In mass presentations, interest may be raised, but so are many unanswered questions. In a one-to-one discussion about the vision, those questions are put to rest and the vision can be more easily personalized. What makes a vision most attractive is fervor. When someone finds someone else of like mind who is passionate about a cause, the person wants to know more about it — in much the same manner non-Christians are most often attracted to Christ when they have observed a believer who is ardently in love with Christ and has committed his or her life to serving Him.

SELL IT

It is one thing to be passionate and genuine in your vision. It is another thing altogether to invite others to embrace the vision with the same zeal you possess. Visionary leaders are, to some extent, salesmen: their abilities to lead depends in part on their abilities to attract people who will invest in the ministry, and that decision hinges on

people's desires to see the vision be fulfilled. No matter how appealing the vision may be, it will take some degree of salesmanship to attract people to get on board. Perhaps this seems crass; or maybe you have a distaste for selling. It may be you do not believe that a great idea — God's idea, no less — should require any kind of human promotion. If so, I have two thoughts for you to consider.

First, realize you are interacting with fallen people, in a competitive marketplace. Truth does not always win over people's hearts although all truth is God's truth. When truth has an effective champion, however, people's eyes can be opened and their hearts won by what is right. Vision is no different. When God's vision has a die-hard proponent who can effectively and persistently communicate that vision to people who are searching for a compelling cause and a can't-miss proposition, you are not so much selling as you are counseling people. Second, if you get to the point where God entrusts His vision to you, selling won't seem like such a big deal. Your focus shifts from self-centeredness ("what if they reject me," "what if I feel uncomfortable," "what if I don't do an effective presentation") to God-centeredness ("I can't let God down," "what a blessing to be able to serve Him this way," "His people will want to get in on this").

PUT IT INTO ACTION

If your vision remains just a compelling idea or an alluring dream, you have failed. Vision is about creating a preferable future. Part of your responsibility as a leader is not only to identify, articulate and sell the vision, but also to ensure that it becomes a reality.

Implementing the vision calls for several things. You must have a team that is energetically behind the vision. You must amass the resources required for implementation. You need a plan, complete with goals, strategies and tactics, to move forward effectively and efficiently. You need to create processes to introduce the vision into ministry in practical ways. You must have evaluative tools prepared so you can assess how well you are doing along the way, fine-tuning your implementation efforts as you go along.

Please make an important distinction here. Your salvation is not affected by how well you champion the vision. Your eternal place in His presence rests solely on your response to Christ's death for you on the cross. Your response to your call to lead, your involvement in using your leadership gift and talents, and your success in making the vision a reality are elements of your obedience — demonstrations of your willingness to serve. Put the vision into action for the right reason — not to gain jewels in your crown, but to know the joy of making a positive difference in the world by pouring yourself into serving Christ.

REFINE THE VISION

In the course of time, things change: demographics, your ministry team, your opportunities and so on. On the one hand, I discovered that the vision usually outlives the visionary (which, incidentally, makes a strong case for not only passing the vision on to the next generation, but also for developing an emerging generation of leaders who can carry on the vision with your passion and knowledge). On the other hand, during your pursuit of its fulfillment, you will probably have to "touch up" the peripheral contours of the vision. Understand that the core elements — the heart — of the vision will not change. What may shift somewhat are some of the less central elements of the focus.

REINFORCE THE VISION

Naturally, when people get involved in a cause that is countercultural (and what ministry isn't?), which demands considerable personal sacrifice, and is in competition with a plethora of other alternatives for people's attention, involvement and resources, an effective leader is one who will reinforce people's decisions to choose the vision as their focus. This, of course, is a basic tenet of good marketing: Always reinforce the buyer's decision. It is also a fundamental principle of great leadership: Always encourage your people, for without their hard work and continuing passion you are no longer leading.

You reinforce the decision in the following ways:

- By expressing appreciation for their involvement.
- By celebrating their successes.
- By constantly re-communicating the vision in new ways, in unique but relevant contexts.
- By providing them with insight into progress made.
- By describing the growth of the movement or the effect of the cause.
- By letting them observe, in unguarded moments, your genuine and unbridled enthusiasm for the vision, the people who have caught and nurtured it and the forward movement that is evident.
- By finding new ways to motivate people who are on the verge of burnout or loss of perspective.

As I have studied visionary leaders break through barriers that nobody but the visionary's own people believed could be overcome, these nine steps have been the consistent path to such overachievement. These have been beneficial, along with a constant diet of spiritual discipline: prayer, meditation, fasting, devouring Scripture, praise, worship, communion among the brethren and confession.

GET VISION!

A phrase from Proverbs that is used repeatedly sticks in my mind: "Get wisdom!" As we consider what it means and what it takes to be a leader, we can modify that phrase slightly to underscore one of the fundamental needs of a godly leader: "Get vision!"

Realize that a leader is called to a higher standard of performance than are followers. The means to pleasing God in leadership is through radical obedience to His will for our leadership. Vision represents a succinct description of what we are striving to accomplish through the act of leading God's people. Vision is the starting point of effective leadership. It is also the end point because all our efforts are ultimately measured in terms of the progress we made toward fully and faithfully implementing the vision.

So what is God's vision for the people He has called you to lead? Until that vision is crystal clear to you, you will not be God's leader for the time and space in which you operate. Honor God and His people by discovering that vision and committing your life to it.

Vision Thing Canadian Club Remix â€” The Sisters Of Mercy. 7:34. Vision Thing 2018 Remaster â€” The Sisters Of Mercy. 7:36. Vision Thing â€” The Sister of Mercy.