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BY

DON BURKE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	WHY LEADERS MUST PLAN	2
	A. The Need for a Worthy Purpose	2
	B. The Need for Wise and Confident Decisions	3
	C. The Need for Motivation	3
	D. The Priority of the Long-Term	4
	E. A Unique Responsibility.....	4
	F. The Biblical View	5
III.	THE METHOD OF PLANNING	5
	A. Determine Focus	6
	B. Determine Milestones	7
	C. Capitalize on Ideas	7
	D. Determine Roadblocks.....	8
	E. Determine Available Resources.....	9
	F. Determine Priorities	10
IV.	THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE ON PLANNING	12

INTRODUCTION

A young man drives along the highway after preaching his first sermon, feeling very ambivalent about what is next. Since the previous Sunday when he made known his call to the ministry his attention extended no further than the sermon he just completed. "What do I do from here?" continually echoes through the young man's mind.

Twenty years later finds the same man driving home after preaching the Sunday evening service at the church he pastors. As has been the case for each week in his seventeen years of pastoring, all his ministerial efforts for the past seven days have looked no further than Sunday's services. Monday morning will once again find him beginning a new week's labor from scratch.

This scenario is undoubtedly replayed time and time again in the lives of those God has called into the ministry. The first stage is a legitimate season of uncertainty through which most fledgling preachers must struggle. As the newly formed nation of Israel was dependent upon God's directing their every step through the wilderness, so the young preacher is often dependent upon the step-by-step instructions from God.

But one must wonder about the appropriateness of continuing in such a state. Some twenty-, thirty- and even forty-year veteran church "leaders" have no better sense of God's general direction than they did as young preachers. Is this sense of being adrift an admirable leadership quality and a sign of mature dependence upon God? Tidwell doesn't think so. "Effective practitioners as well as scholars of leaders and leadership often rank *planning* as the most basic and essential skill for effective leadership."¹

¹ Charles A. Tidwell, *Church Administration – Effective Leadership for Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985): 204.

What exactly is planning as it relates to one's ministry? Engstrom aptly answers this when he writes,

[P]lanning is basically nothing more than attempting to decide in advance what we will or will not do in the next minutes, hours, days, months or years. For the Christian leader, planning asks the question as to whether we will affect the future at random or with purpose. Because affect it we will. We have a responsibility to decide what we should be or do, and therefore *must* plan.²

WHY LEADERS MUST PLAN

Why is planning such a necessary element for effective ministry? What should motivate a busy leader to take time from his already over-crowded schedule to make plans in his ministry?

The Need for a Worthy Purpose

Within many people there is a need for a sense of direction – to simply know where they are going and why. "Though they may not be able to articulate it, church members sense a need for long-range planning."³

For many ministries this purpose has never been given real consideration, which often indicates that the ministry's purpose is unclear or not on-target.

For years I pastored churches by problem solving rather than planning. No matter how many problems were solved, however, I never felt we made progress. The size and number of the problems set the pace of the church and the pastor. I remember leaving church board meetings knowing that the church was afloat but somehow adrift.⁴

Covey notes how easily such a situation can develop: "It's incredibly easy to get caught up in an activity trap, in the busy-ness of life, to work harder and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall."⁵

² Ted W. Engstrom and Edward R. Dayton, *The Art of Management for Christian Leaders* (Waco: Word, 1976): 45.

³ Joel C. Hunter, "Clearing Your Vision" *Leadership* Vol. X No. 2 (Spring 1991): 122.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Fireside, 1990): 98.

Thus, the leader must look for a deeper purpose than the clamor of activities. Anderson concludes, “We have to know the reason why the person or organization exists. . . . Knowing why is a key responsibility of effective leadership.”⁶ He later adds “Vision should begin with an answer to the ‘why’ question. . . . [T]here can be no viable vision without a primary purpose.”⁷

The Need for Wise and Confident Decisions

Planning that identifies the desired purpose of a ministry fosters greater confidence in making daily decisions. Decisions that will aid in achieving that end are likely to be good moves, while those that deviate from, or are in opposition to, that end can usually be quickly discarded. “To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now and *so that the steps you take are always in the right direction*”⁸ (emphasis added).

Most dynamic and growing ministries today have developed a clear picture of what God wants them to do. To reach this goal, they never burden themselves with programs that provide little more than outlets for activity. Instead they develop ministries that move them toward their goals – and they modify or eliminate those that do not help the church accomplish them.⁹

The Need for Motivation

Knowing that there is both a purpose and a plan to achieve that purpose instills meaning to a person’s labors. This sense of participation in something meaningful can be an effective motivation for people.

Clarity in a ministry's direction also allows a person to see where his unique contributions can best be used. Like Bezaleel of old (Ex. 31:1-5), knowing that one is able to contribute in a

⁶ Leith Anderson, *Leadership that Works* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999): 193.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

⁸ Covey, 98.

⁹ Carl F. George and Robert E. Logan, *Leading & Managing Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987):

manner that is befitting his own unique abilities and in a way that no one else could equally minister can instill a tremendous sense of self-motivation.

The Priority of the Long-Term

In the words of Stephen Covey, the *important* (i.e., that which contributes to one's mission, values, and high-priority goals) is easily sacrificed for the *urgent* (i.e., that which cries for immediate attention, regardless of its long-term value),¹⁰ and those in ministry are certainly not immune to this pitfall. Hunter notes, "It's natural for the congregation's most immediate needs to capture our attention."¹¹ However, as he later explains the specific benefits he found in his own long-term planning, he adds, "[M]y preaching and planning now are markedly different. They are, I trust, still relevant to current issues, but they also paint a broader stroke. People have a sense of anticipation as well as a sense of history. Planning around a larger theme allows latitude even as it insures consistency."¹²

A Unique Responsibility

Many of the leader's activities can be delegated to staff, volunteers and even contracted out to professional services. However, while the leader is wise to get input on ministry planning, no one but the leader is in a position to adequately determine the direction the ministry should actually go. "[I]n twenty years of ministry I had never seen a committee receive a vision."¹³

Giving this task adequate attention may require the leader to remove himself from his daily distractions. Hunter shares that as the church leader he had to ". . . simply get away from

¹⁰ Covey, 150-151.

¹¹ Hunter, 122.

¹² Ibid., 123.

¹³ Hunter, 120.

the church and its routine, even if only for a few days, to do what I – and no one else in the congregation – am called to: gaining vision for the future.”¹⁴

The Biblical View

Some would argue that the Biblical pattern opposes human planning. After all, they reason, the Israelites' trek through the wilderness was not the result of Moses' planning. Instead the Israelites waited until God initiated each move (Ex. 40:36-37).

Certainly there are numerous times when God called on His people (e.g., Abraham) to proceed by faith and not by sight (Heb. 11:8; 2 Cor. 5:7). However, this doesn't necessitate that He condemns all human planning. Biehl aptly discusses this subject under his consideration of James 4:13-15:

One of the questions I wrestled with as a young leaders was, “Should a Christian try to plan for future direction? ” . . . At one point in my life I thought that [this passage] meant, “Therefore, why plan?” . . .

You need to read the rest of the passage because it goes on to say, “Instead, you *ought* [which is like a command or a directive] to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (italics added [by Biehl]). It isn’t a matter of should we plan or not plan. That’s the wrong question. . . . The question is, should we plan saying, “This is what we will do regardless of what God wants,” or should we plan saying, “If the Lord will, we shall do this or that.”¹⁵

One must therefore conclude that this passage gives no prohibition for planning. Conversely, other passages (e.g., Proverbs 22:3) extol the virtues of proper foresight and planning.

THE METHOD OF PLANNING

Having established the need to plan, the question of how to plan must be addressed. A number of methods are offered to formulate an effective ministry plan, including those by

¹⁴ Hunter, 122.

¹⁵ Bobb Biehl, *Masterplanning* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997): 21.

Hocking,¹⁶ Rusbult,¹⁷ Powers,¹⁸ and Gangel.¹⁹ Biehl's more detailed approach proved to be the most insightful method found in this study and will form the basic framework for this section.

Determine Focus

The first need in formulating a ministry plan is to establish the focus. According to Biehl there are three elements involved in formulating such a focus: Determining needs, determining purpose, and determining objectives.²⁰

Needs. Biehl notes that many of the terms associated with planning are often vague, and at times fail to convey the same message to different people. Words such as *purpose*, *objectives*, and *priorities* do not always convey the same concepts to all those working to establish a ministry plan. Because of this difficulty Biehl often includes questions that help clarify his meaning. To help establish the core issue of *need* he offers the following two questions: “What needs do we feel deeply burdened by and uniquely qualified to meet? What needs make us weep or pound the table?”²¹

Purpose. By establishing the needs that a ministry will endeavor to address, much of the struggle to determine the ministry's purpose is accomplished. Here again two questions help to establish the ministry's purpose or mission: “In light of the needs discussed previously . . . [w]hy does our team exist?” and “How are we unique from any other group or organization?”²²

Objectives. Having established the ministry's needs and purpose, consideration should be given to its objectives. "Objectives identify the things we will do to meet the needs we have

¹⁶ David Hocking, *The Seven Laws of Christian Leadership* (Ventura: Regal, 1991): 231.

¹⁷ Richard E. Rusbult, Richard K. Gladden, and Norman M. Green, Jr. *Local Church Planning Manual* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1977): 12.

¹⁸ Bruce P Powers, *Christian Leadership* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1979): 44-59.

¹⁹ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Feeding and Leading* (Wheaton: Scripture Press, 1989): 92-98.

²⁰ Biehl, 22.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 33, 35.

identified and to fulfill the purpose we have defined,"²³ Biehl states. His clarification question is, "In what three to seven areas will we continue being actively involved in the future?"²⁴

The leader will likely determine multiple objectives as essential elements of the ministry plan. The remaining stages in planning should be completed for each of these various objectives.

Determine Milestones

Noting previous milestones in a ministry can provide a number of benefits. Milestones illustrate the hand of God in a particular ministry. Since leaders are often without an external source of encouragement such comfort can help to fill a significant void.

By showing what God has done and offering hope for what He will do in this ministry, milestones are an excellent means of motivating followers. They also give a realistic basis for future planning as well as being an excellent means of orienting new staff. Knowing a ministry's history can create a deeper appreciation for both the ministry and those involved in it.

Rusbult notes that the past is not the only place to find beneficial milestones. Setting future milestones is valuable as well. "Plans that fail often have no concrete milestones or dates to review progress."²⁵

Capitalize on Ideas

A ministry that intends to move forward must have its primary focus on something other than highlights in the past. Ideas which are shaped by a ministry's purpose help that ministry to move from past milestones to even greater ones in the future. Therefore Biehl asks the question, "What ideas have we had that we should consider turning into priorities?"²⁶

²³ Ibid., 41.

²⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁵ Rusbult, 231.

²⁶ Biehl, 51.

Biehl offers some suggestions on the use of ideas.²⁷ First, all ideas should be written down so that they are not forgotten. An idea should be pondered, allowing at least a few days before deciding to either act upon it or discard it. Here again, Biehl suggests going through the idea file periodically to select the three best ones to consider acting upon – to make “priorities.”

Caution should be taken to distinguish between new ideas and established priorities. Established projects have the benefit of being filtered and adjusted by weeks and even years of scrutiny. Seldom is it wise to whimsically sacrifice such projects for a spur-of-the-moment idea.

Determine Roadblocks

Only a person blind to life’s realities would fail to comprehend that obstacles will arise in any endeavor, including ministries. Yet far too many leaders find themselves blind-sided by obstacles that could have been easily anticipated. Rusbult includes the failure to anticipate obstacles among his list of seven reasons that plans fail.²⁸

The first step is to ascertain whether a roadblock is real or assumed – an “imaginary roadblock” as Biehl labels it.²⁹ Often progress is unnecessarily halted or never started simply because it is assumed that people or circumstance will not be cooperative.

Second, one must get a clear picture of the real obstacles. Biehl suggests that for each established objective the leader ask, “What three roadblocks are keeping us from reaching our full potential?”³⁰

The third step in getting a grasp on obstacles to ministry is to look for commonality among the roadblocks.

²⁷ Ibid., 51-52.

²⁸ Rusbult, 231.

²⁹ Biehl, 55.

³⁰ Ibid.

As you identify the roadblocks in each of your objective areas, you will begin to note recurring roadblocks. . . . You are going to find patterns of one or two things that are holding you back in every area of your team's development. This will demand that your leadership team focus its energy on dealing with these [roadblocks].³¹

Common roadblocks include lack of capital, lack of available leaders, and lack of adequate facilities.

Determine Available Resources

Having established those elements that are likely to cause problems, the leader now has the pleasure of determining those things that should be considered as assets. Continuing in his pattern, Biehl here suggests listing the three greatest resources available to help achieve each established objective.³²

A number of factors should be weighed in the area of resources. Finances certainly must be considered, as well as facilities, equipment and other materials assets. Less tangible elements such as education and influence might also need to be considered, depending on one's type of ministry.

One of the more difficult factors to properly evaluate is people. Since all people have both strengths and weaknesses, any person has the potential to be both an asset and a liability. Drucker makes an insightful comment on this issue when he writes, "The effective executive fills positions and promotes on the basis of what a man can do. He does not make staffing decisions to minimize weaknesses [within an individual] but to maximize strength."³³ Certainly the ministry leader shouldn't ignore any moral problems that could jeopardize the ministry. But to the degree possible all positions should be staffed in such a way that members maximize their

³¹ Ibid., 56.

³² Ibid., 59.

³³ Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1967): 71.

individual strengths and where their weaknesses can be accepted without being detrimental to the ministry.

Determine Priorities

All the work in planning to this point is the necessary preparation for this next vital stage. This established framework should be the foundation for building clear goals. “The first step for any successful planning effort begins with clearly defined and communicable goals. It cannot be said too often: fuzzy goals will produce fuzzy plans.”³⁴

Things to Avoid. In order for goals, or “priorities” as Biehl labels them, to be most effective a few things should be avoided. The first hindrance is the misconception that everyone should be a goal setter. Biehl notes the distinction between “goal setters” and “problem solvers.”³⁵ He estimates that 60-90% of all people fall into the latter category, which means they are lost and frustrated when forced to set goals. He then offers some insights to help the leader keep a balanced perspective on the differences in the two types of people.

Problem solvers are not second-class citizens. They are the defensive unit of the team that complements the offensive unit (goal setters). Both goal setters and problem solvers are absolutely indispensable whenever you want to win in the games of life! . . .

Keep setting goals to focus your future, but encourage the problem solvers on your team to focus their future by defining the problems they will solve instead of the goals they will reach!³⁶

The collective goals of the goal setters plus the problems anticipated by the problem solvers formulate the “priorities” that Biehl refers to here. While Biehl’s point is well taken, the balance of this discussion will use both “goals” and “priorities” in the collective sense without the distinctions Biehl makes.

³⁴ Engstrom, 53.

³⁵ Biehl, 67.

³⁶ Ibid., 69.

The second hindrance is setting unrealistic or immeasurable goals. In setting realistic goals one must not be unduly influenced by either caution or idealism: Caution shouldn't prevent setting challenging goals, nor should idealism be allowed to set the goal beyond what is realistically reachable.

The third hindrance is a hesitancy to make any plans for the future since no one really knows what the future will hold. And, it is reasoned, if one can't know the future then there is no way to be sure the effort of planning is not in vain. Certainly such a perspective does have a degree of merit, and when properly exercised it will help prevent disillusion and despair when circumstances force a change in or even abandoning of the established plans.

However, the hesitancy to abandon all planning fails to recognize a few basic points. There is a percentage of the future, and especially those events that are in the near-future, that will happen just as initially anticipated. To abandon all planning would cause one to lose the benefits of preparedness for these events.

Events and circumstances in the more-uncertain distant future may seem more problematic. However, these events offer much more time to monitor and to make needed adjustments to plans. Thus, those events that seem to be the most uncertain actually offer the greater opportunity for proper preparation.

Even if all estimations of the future prove to be incorrect the planning still provides some very real benefits. Planning carried out to fruition provides a common direction for all team members. With a common direction there is less chance of finding oneself pursuing efforts that are counterproductive to those of the other team members. Thus, the final accomplishments of a unified team will be greater, even if they were prompted by an anticipated but unrealized need or event.

Time Frames. Biehl suggests that priorities be divided into four time frames: Long-range (five to twenty years), mid-range (two to five years), short-range (up to two years), and quarterly (the next 90 days). Once determined each range should in turn feed the next, shorter-termed, goals.

Biehl offers a few guidelines for setting priorities which are applicable to each time range.³⁷ Set a maximum of three priorities per objective area. Priorities should be “written in measurable terms . . . so in two years you will know whether you accomplished them or not.” Also they should be “written in pencil” so as to allow for inevitable changes. Engstrom speaks to this last guideline when he states,

If plans are considered as fixed and unchangeable, then most likely they will fail. Planning is a *process*. The necessary steps are laid out, pointing toward the future goal, but as each major step is taken, a reevaluation, or feedback, process that calls us first to reexamine the future at each step and secondly measures the extent of our progress.³⁸

In setting ministry priorities one should be careful not to over-estimate the ability to achieve goals. Biehl cautions that most ministries “will typically accomplish in *two years* what it hopes to accomplish in *one year*” due to a number of difficulties, including staff and monetary constraints.³⁹

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE ON PLANNING

There is no question that efficient ministry requires proper planning. “A good planning process will help your church discover *who* it is and *what* it is; decide *what* it should do, *how* it should do what it does, and *when*. Further, planning will help your church know how well it achieved what it wanted to accomplish.”⁴⁰ However one must never allow planning to become

³⁷ Ibid., 80-81.

³⁸ Engstrom, 47.

³⁹ Biehl, 79.

⁴⁰ Rusbult, 10.

the primary focus of the ministry. Planning is an excellent tool in the hands of a capable workman, but the tool should be a means to a better end and not an end in itself.

What should be a ministry's primary focus, i.e., the motivation behind the planning?

According to Christ, a ministry's primary focus must be upon love (Matthew 22:37-40). Joe

Rhodes says it well:

I think the pastor's role often is to maintain the right spirit in the midst of decision making. I had a seminary professor who said, "You have to do two things to be effective: love God and love people."

I've hung on to that. In leading people, I recognize the direction we go is important, but it's equally important to love each other in the process.⁴¹

⁴¹ Milton Cunningham et al. "How Do You Steer a Church?" *Leadership* Vol. X No. 2 (Spring 1989): 132.

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