

Vision Killers

An extract from "The Power of Vision" by George Barna

You will face stiff opposition from Satan as you seek to comprehend the vision that God has designed for your ministry. Your grasp of that vision will pound another nail in his coffin; he will do all he can to prevent you from absorbing God's vision.

Yet, probably the greatest obstacle you will face in the process may have little to do with Satan or demonic forces. Sometimes we give the devil more credit than he deserves. In many instances rather than blame the devil, we should instead look in the mirror to find the real culprit.

Having examined the vision capturing and vision-disseminating process in many churches, I have noticed a group of vision inhibitors that consistently emerge. These are beliefs, assumptions, practices and emotions that arise to prevent the vision from emerging or from being widely accepted. By identifying these self-made barriers to vision, perhaps you can avoid falling prey to their debilitating effect on your ministry.

A pastor must think strategically if he wishes to counter vision killers. He must recognize the obstacles he will encounter and develop a strategy to overcome them.

Keep in mind, for example, that at least one segment of a congregation will say "But we've never done it that way." One strategy will be to counter by showing how the church actually has accommodated change and how embarking upon change will "give the church an edge" in ministry. Be prepared to show that while no other church in the area "has ever done it that way," the proposed change "gives us an opportunity to touch people in a way that they have never been touched."

Most leaders discover that they begin to think strategically as they work through the vision-making process. The focus of one new church, for example, was on seekers, unchurched people who have little interest in being a church. With that in mind, the strategic factor came into play. When seekers visited the church, members knew these visitors were thinking, "What are you going to do for me?" Because seekers are part of the vision, members of the congregation needed to know how to respond by doing "something that will impact the life of a non-Christian." At that point, the pastor knows he needs to teach the congregation how to build relationships with non-church people, what they like, what they think about, what they do with their free time, what they think about the Bible, why they don't attend church. Then, he may suggest how to meet these people and how to deal with them when they tell their four-letter-word jokes.

The pastor's challenge is: How am I going to get Christians who have always been in churches that have targeted Christians to break habits developed over a lifetime? The response to that question is what makes the strategic perspective so important.

Vision Killers : Tradition

One of the most popular and devastating barriers to true vision is the notion that God would never cause you to change what you have always done before. This usually is expressed through such exclamations as "but we've never done it that way before."

In reality, God uses traditions in ministry to provide people with a semblance of consistency and stability. Traditions can form a foundation upon which He build the future. Traditions can serve as a bridge between the past and the future, enabling people to retain a comfort zone while focusing on Him.

But God has no use for traditions that block progress. He blesses those traditions that build the church and His people, not because they are traditions but because they serve His purposes. Indeed, He tends to reshape traditions by moving them in new directions. He updates them with a more relevant and contemporary expression of those truths that made the tradition valuable initially. But His primary concern is not with the style or format of the tradition; His interest is in its ability to draw people closer to Him.

Tradition is generally a reflection of the past. Vision is always a reflection of the future. Is there any room for a marriage between the two? Absolutely! Because He is the God who created and reigned over the past, He can use history to His advantage in your life and ministry. He has no reason to blot out all memory of the past or to deny its value and power. Instead, it is likely that He will continue to move you in a ministry direction that helps you mature. Maturity means growing beyond your past and embodies what and where you have been. He will use your past to enhance your future.

In your ministry, acknowledge your past for what it has been. Recognize the traditions and patterns that enabled you to impact people's lives for His glory. Use those as stepping-stones, building your ministry for maximum impact. Determine how you can honor your past by incorporating past strengths into your future.

Vision Killers : Fear

Grasping and implementing God's vision can be a frightening prospect. As mentioned earlier, vision requires change. Change means breaking out of the comfort zone, doing new things or operating in areas in which we lack a track record of success or substantial levels of self-confidence. Change can be scary. Moving in new directions or attempting new methods of ministry is risky. Risk raises the possibility of failure, and none of us want to fail, especially in ministry.

Sometimes we are overcome by fear because we have failed in the past and dare not reach for the stars again. Sometimes we dwell on our past failures or our sense of limitation. Rather than define defeat as either repeating the same mistake or refusing to take a risk, we think of it as not reaching our goals. We then allow the fear of failure to restrict our universe of opportunities to those that are safe. By focusing on our failings, we miss out on our potential.

We also experience fear in situations that we cannot control completely. Few Christians, leaders or not, arrive at a point where they totally release the reins of their lives and allow God to rule every moment of every day. We often lack faith the size of a mustard seed. In its place, we assert our authority over our destiny. Consequently, we are paralyzed by fear, limited in our ability to forge new trails for God's glory.

Vision replaces fear with energy and hope. It dismisses unbelief and replaces it with peace and assurance. Vision raises questions, but it does not raise nagging doubts.

If you are beset by fear about the future or fear about the vision He has entrusted to you, recognize that fear for what it is : lack of faith in God's ability to work through you for His purposes. Pray through the fear. Abdicate control of your ministry to Him. Believe that He can do what He desires to do.

Vision Killers : Stereotypes

A stereotype is a popular preconception about people or conditions. American culture is saturated with stereotypes. Christian culture and ministry too, are riddled with such cliches.

Recently I encountered dozens of stereotypes in churches, all of which I tested and found to be untrue. A church in Arizona persisted with traditional organ music on Sundays because its

membership was elderly. It was discovered, however, that members were sick of the style of music and desired "something a bit more modern and lively." A pastor in Alabama confided that his church was in turmoil over the role of women and how centuries-old stereotypes about their abilities and gifts prevented them from serving in biblical ways. Stereotypes regarding racial and ethnic characteristics, versions of the Bible, styles of preaching, the educational capacity of certain schools, the acceptability of styles of music and many other elements have caused divisiveness and hardship within the church and have prevented us from penetrating the church beyond the sanctuary walls.

Stereotypes are sometimes used as a shortcut to truth. However, such shortcuts do not exist. In contrast, God's vision for your ministry is founded on truth. It requires that you see yourself and the world realistically and respond in a realistic manner. Stereotypes lead to bad decisions. God's vision leads to wise decisions if you have cleansed your mind and heart of the erroneous perceptions that may be reflected in stereotypes.

Vision Killers : Complacency

Sometimes we fail to behave with vigor and passion because we are ignorant or complacent. "It doesn't matter what we do. God will bless our efforts." This statement is a prescription for half-baked, half-blessed ministry. He does care what we do. If He didn't care, He would not have given dreams and words to the prophets. In fact, He would not have provided prophets. If He didn't care, He would not ask us to seek His guidance and ask for His blessing. If He didn't care, He would not have allowed certain passages of the Bible to become part of the canon. (eg Jas. 2:14-17, Luke 14:28-32, Rev. 3:15-18).

God's passion for mankind is evident in the story of Jesus Christ. The passion of visionary leaders like Paul and David is evident in their works. Complacency is the extinguisher of that smoldering passion. Once the passion has been extinguished, we are of little value in the raging fight between the powers of light and darkness. Those who reflect complacency and ignorance will be the next casualties on the spiritual battlefield.

As you evaluate your quest for His vision, test your passion quotient. Are you ready to give it all you've got? Would you die for the chance to see that vision become reality? Do you care enough about your relationship with Him and for the deployment of the vision He gives you to put everything you have on the line? Is your church so lethargic that the prospects of fulfilling the vision are slim? If you are serious about serving Him to the fullest, identify those people whose hearts are lukewarm and avoid letting them hinder the process.

Vision Killers : Fatigue

Ministry is not easy. Even the greatest spiritual warriors need times of rest. Jesus took time for solitude. If you have difficulty generating excitement about the vision or if you have trouble grasping the vision, check to see if you are running on empty.

Vision calls for a tremendous degree of faith and energy. Seeking vision when you are exhausted makes no sense. Your natural inclination will be to resist those perspectives that call for you to break down known barriers and to redefine the known. Fatigue will limit your vision and your influence for Him.

I have also witnessed cases where a congregation has essentially rejected God's vision because it, as an entity, was too spent from recent battles and victories to entertain the prospect of climbing new spiritual mountains. It is the wise leader who prepares the church body to hear and to embrace that vision by persuading them to rest for the next leg of the journey.

As a leader grappling with a matter of universal and eternal significance, you, too, must be well rested before embarking on the vision-seeking journey. Prepare for the challenge by recharging your mental, emotional and spiritual batteries. When you are energized for the challenge, move forward.

Vision Killers : Short Term Thinking

Today, leaders are increasingly interested in cashing in resources for short-term benefits. The tragedy is that it leaves nothing in place for the long run. To follow such a course robs us of a satisfying future by chasing immediate gratification. We deplete the past to enjoy the present at the expense of the future.

The truth is,, however, that God's vision for ministry is long term in nature. His vision may well outlive the visionary. His goals are eternal, not temporal. His knowledge and resources are unlimited, enabling us to pursue a vision for which He will be responsible to the end.

His timing is often different from our own. He is not pressured by time. He has created a season for each good thing and knows the appropriate pace for life. His timing is perfect. We should pursue the vision in concert with His timing. Rather than seek quick results and tangible benefits in the short term, how much better to dream the big dream and to be part of the fundamental transformation of people's lives and of entire cultures. His vision may lead you to such grandiose activities. Define your measures of success in ministry such that you respond to His timing, not that of the world.

In the end, you are the only person who can limit your ability to dream big with God. As a leader, you have a responsibility to recognize and overcome the inhibitors of God's vision. IF you are truly committed to capturing His vision for your ministry, see the pitfalls for what they are : danger zones to be avoided. They are not obstacles that should remove you from the action on the spiritual playing field.

From : The Power of Vision by George Barna. Published by Regal Books, 1992. ISBN 0-8307-1601-7 Reproduced with Permission.
