

A Leader's Most Difficult Task

Written by Bill Perkins

It surprised me when I discovered leaders consider their most difficult task the casting of a compelling vision. A vision is important because it has the power to attract and energize people who want to see it realized.

Fishers of Men

Time and again Jesus reminded his disciples that his purpose was to seek and save lost people. On the day he called his first disciples he said, "I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). When he recruited Levi he said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

Jesus was so consumed with this purpose that he repeatedly took advantage of real-life situations to communicate his compelling vision. After speaking with the woman at the well, Jesus told his disciples, "Don't you say, 'There are four months until the harvest?' But I tell you, lift your eyes and look at the fields, they are already white for harvest." (John 4:35) "Don't you say, 'There are four months until the harvest?' But I tell you, lift your eyes and look at the fields, they are already white for harvest." (Luke 19:10).

Jesus frequently used teaching situations to stoke this vision in his followers. He spoke of sowing the seed of God's word into men's hearts (Luke 8:1-12) and allowing their lights to shine before men (Matthew 5:14-16).

More Than Memos

Jesus used vivid imagery and so must we. As leaders we need to do more than send memos about our vision. We must lock on to it and adapt the message to each situation.

"Who's the Customer?"

My friend, Bob Farrell, has opened over 150 restaurants without a failure--which is an amazing accomplishment since over 80% of all restaurants fail within five years of their opening. His vision was to build restaurants where every employee was committed to customer service. To communicate his vision, Bob had every new employee attend a training session where he would ask the 100 eager food servers, dishwashers, and managers, "Who's the customer?" and the employees would yell back, "The boss!"

Bob Donned an Apron

But Bob did more than give pep talks at employee rallies. He communicated the vision personally with every employee. One night a dishwasher didn't show up and so Bob donned an apron and helped the teenager who was washing dishes. He was careful to point out to the high-school student that every dish had to be sparkling clean because it was placed in front of the customer.

"A sliver of lettuce on an otherwise clean plate will distract the customer from everything else we have to offer him," Bob said. At Bob's restaurants, dishwashers weren't cleaning dirty dishes; they were preparing a sparkling plate for a waiting customer.

If you want to inspire those you lead, communicate your vision in terms that relate to them. Explain how everything they do is important because it helps bring the vision into reality. That includes washing dishes, greeting customers, unloading trucks, and answering the phone. Every activity takes on value when it's connected to the vision.