

How To Capture & Cast A Compelling Vision

Engaging the Process to Clarify & Communicate a Dynamic Vision for Your Church

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"Inspiring vision isn't about what you're church doesn't do!" As I shared those words with a pastor, I could see his mind racing. After talking for over an hour about the church he is leading, I refocused his attention on the issue of vision. In his mind, he knew exactly what he *didn't* want his church to be – traditional, cluttered with programs, or a drop-off station for parents too lazy to disciple their kids. But, what he wanted the church to be, well, that wasn't so clear. And that's when I challenged him: "You can't build a church (or any organization) on what you're *not* going to do. People follow leaders with vision. And vision is about what you will do, not what you won't do."

This tension is common in the early years of a leader's life. Most of us didn't start with a clear philosophy of ministry or leadership. All we knew was that when we saw something we didn't like, we pointed at it with disgust and said, "When I'm a pastor, I won't do *that*!" And so our "won't do that" list grew longer with time. The problem is, we didn't simultaneously create a "would do" list to counter the "won't do" list.

This isn't all bad. The way things *are* usually serves as the catalyst for the way things *could be.* And therein lies the rub. Too many leaders invite people to follow them into the wild blue yonder simply because they don't like the way things are. They forget that current reality is the stimulus to change, not the substance of vision.

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The current reality that you dislike (ineffective strategies, a disconnect with culture, a poor ministry model, etc.) should stimulate you to make changes. It should spark a deep dissatisfaction in your soul. But your current reality is not the substance of your vision. Substance isn't what your church won't be; substance is what your church will be. If the substance of your vision is to *not be something,* then your vision has no life, and it will lead you to make decisions for the simple sake of rebelling against what once was. So how do you ensure that your vision is more about "will do" substance rather than a never-ending list of "won't dos?" It begins with a thorough vision-birthing process.

Several years ago I was in a discussion with a group of leaders who were wrestling with their organization's vision. In an effort to help the discussion, I pitched an "example" of vision to the group. A surge of positive emotion erupted as the group tried to figure out how to adopt the vision I presented as their own. Concerned about where

things were heading, I cautioned the group, reminding them that you can't turn someone else's vision into your own. You have to wrestle with it for days, weeks, even months. Visions with "will do" substance are born out of a process that is often emotional, even gut wrenching.

CAPTURING YOUR VISION

To understand the vision-formation process, it's helpful to see it in action. The Old Testament example of Nehemiah offers us a powerful example. The formation of vision in Nehemiah's heart followed a three-step process.

1. **Ask Soul-Stirring Questions**

Nehemiah 1:2 says, "Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem."

> Reality is the stimulus to change, not the substance of vision.

Nehemiah's vision journey began when he asked his brother two soul-stirring questions:

- What's the condition of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem?
- What's the condition of the city?

These weren't just any questions? These questions had roots that traced back to the pain of the exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. God used those inquiries to begin depositing vision into Nehemiah's heart. What might have seemed like a simple concern quickly turned into a boiling pot of emotion. Out of these soul-stirring questions, Nehemiah began feeling the weight of a problem.

2. **Define the Intersection of Problems and Passions**

Nehemiah 1:3-4a captures the answer to Nehemiah's questions. "'They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.' When I heard this, I sat down and wept." Nehemiah's discovery of a problem intersected his passion. When he heard the condition of the city and its people, he wept. *The weight of the problem intersected his passion for the people.* The same will be true for you. Vision is like a Venn diagram with three intersecting circles.



Vision that does not encompass the community will turn inward and lack transformational power in the world. Vision that fails to leverage the leader's personal passions will be short-lived, and will ultimately become draining to the leader. And vision that does not consider the people's passions, will likely meet significant resistance. For Nehemiah, all three circles merged: The community's problem (broken gates and walls), his personal passions (the suffering of his people), and the people's passion (to no longer live in disgrace). What are the problems in your community (or world) that need to be solved? Which of these problems intersect with your passion and the passion of the church? What would be an appropriate biblical response to these problems?

3. **Fast and Pray**

Finally, Nehemiah spent time fasting and praying. Nehemiah 1:4b-11a says, "In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said, "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses. "Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you

return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.' "The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me."

The prayer recorded in Nehemiah 1:4–11 is likely a summary of a four-month season of prayer. This solidified the vision in Nehemiah's heart. It gave him time to hear from God, to sort out what was personal and what was providential, and to see clearly what God was leading him to do.

What about you? Are you tempted to jump before God has given you a green light? Have you set aside adequate time to really fast and pray? Have your prayers resulted in clarity about what God is leading you and the church to do?

Through this vision formation process, Nehemiah's God-given vision became clear. If we were to summarize his vision into a single statement, it might be as follows:

Nehemiah's vision is to see Jerusalem restored
by rebuilding its walls and renewing the people's faith in God.

Nehemiah's vision ultimately came to pass. In only 52 days the walls were rebuilt, and then Ezra the priest and the Levites led the people in worship, confession, repentance, and vows to God.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROCESS

When my wife, Karen, and I decided to plant a church in 2012, it was preceded by a lengthy vision-formation process. It was frustrating at times because I knew I wanted to pastor a church, but I didn't know what I wanted that church to look like. Once we went public with our decision to start a new church, I suddenly realized the value of the long vision formation process that we had endured. In a matter of weeks, Karen and I had dozens of meetings with people over coffee, lunch, or dinner to cast our vision. The "process" gave us a vision to cast…and one worth listening to. Reflecting on that journey, I've learned never to underestimate the vision-formation process. Two insights are particularly clear to me:

1. **Don't Rush the Process –** The birthing of a vision in a leader's heart is often a raw mixture of pain, sweat, prayer, learning, editing, reflecting, and dreaming. Leaders

have a biased toward action, and sometimes that bias trumps the vision-formation process. We want it quick and we want it now. While visions may form quickly, my experience is that the vision with the deepest roots often grows slowly over time. As I reflect on my own vision-formation process for 7 City Church, I observe two things:

- The *values* that shaped my vision "cooked" inside of me for over ten years.
- The *words* that describe my vision "focused" for over three years.

I'm not saying your vision-formation process has to take this long. But don't rush it. In fact, there's likely a deep connection between who God has shaped you to be and what God is calling you to do. That was the case for me. My vision cooked for over ten years as two major values formed inside of me. Those values became the cornerstone for my vision. While impatience often tempted me to move quicker, I now see the wisdom of God's timing.

When you rush the process, you usually end up with an unclear vision. Unclear vision typically shows up in three forms:

- **Borrowed Vision**
- **Self-imposed Vision**
- **Fuzzy Vision**

Most visions today look like they were formed by hands with melted fingertips…original prints are nowhere to be found.

Borrowed vision occurs when a leader steals someone else's vision and makes it his own. *Self-imposed vision* happens when a leader dreams up a vision without seeking God for His vision. And *fuzzy vision* happens when a leader simply doesn't take enough time to see a vision clearly. It's usually a rushed process that lacks prayerful, reflective thinking. How much time have you allotted to really capture a clear vision?

2. **Pay Attention to the Fingerprint –** I cannot emphasize enough why this is so important. When leaders pop out a vision like it's a bag of microwave popcorn, it usually lacks creativity and looks like a mass-produced, mind-numbing replica of another leader's vision. We've heard it said a thousand times: vision is like a fingerprint. But my experience is quite the opposite. Most visions today look like they were formed by hands with melted fingertips…original prints are nowhere to be found.

   If your vision has no uniqueness, no creativity, and no DNA that reflects your passion, then you may have rushed through the process of vision formation. Remember, your vision needs substance. Fingerprints aren't captured in the fast moving rapids of impatience. They need to be carefully and visibly imprinted onto the

soft clay of your soul. Is your vision a mind-numbing replica of somebody else's vision? Does the vision truly resonate with your soul? Was it born out of the life-shaping process, values, and experiences God has personally taken you through?

CLARIFYING YOUR VISION

Capturing a vision is where all leaders begin. Once the core of that vision is captured, it must be clarified with the power of simplicity. The best cure for vision-confusion is to write it. Vision becomes clear when you are able to put it on paper. This sounds easy at first, but it can actually be a stretching process in itself. You're trying to take all of the ideas, pictures, and emotions bottled up inside of you and explain them in words that people can understand. But if you never walk through that process, your vision will feel eternally vague, obscure, and lifeless. If your vision is unclear to you, it will be utter confusion to the people you share it with.

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Three years before we planted 7 City Church, I began asking God a question: *How do you transform a city?* I wrestled, prayed, reflected, and edited during this time. Slowly the fog lifted and three major themes came into focus:

- **Cities**
- **Community**
- **Culture**

Then these themes were merged into a statement that brought immense clarity. That "vision statement" is at the core of 7 City Church.

Our Vision is to see cities transformed by inspiring community and influencing culture.

First, our vision is focused on ***transforming cities***. I'll be the first to tell you that we alone cannot transform a city. Nobody can. Transformation is a process that takes lots of people, churches, and organizations. Furthermore, and most importantly, true transformation cannot happen without the transforming presence of Christ. But vision should be big and bold. There's nothing inspiring about a vision that looks like a worn out version of the past. At the heart of our vision is the transformation of cities. We are called to the center of the city.

For 7 City Church, we envision that transformation including two essential ingredients: ***inspiring community*** and ***influencing culture***. By "inspiring community," we mean the community that Christ followers experience as they do life together. We

want people to grow in their relationship with God, and with others, by engaging in biblical community.

By "influencing culture," we embrace an outward focused mobilization of people. We want to positively shape 7 channels of culture:

- **Business**
- **Education**
- **Arts/Entertainment/Media**
- **Government**
- **Social Sector**
- **Church**
- **Family**

Again, we cannot shape, influence, or change any channel of culture alone. But we can do our part. We're not trying to build a church with a program-focused strategy, but rather an emphasis on helping people discover their purpose and leverage their influence to create positive change in society.

Is our vision perfect? Nope. There's not a perfect vision out there. But our vision was born out of a long and prayerful process. As a result, the vision exhibits three qualities that are essential to all visions:

- **It's Clear**
- **It's Compelling**
- **It's Concise**

Without clear vision, you'll wander to your next destination…it just won't be a preferred destination. You can't get "there" when you don't know what "there" looks like.

When I share 7 City's vision with others, there is no confusion. It's ***clear.*** People don't have to listen to me ramble for 30 minutes, only to be more confused than when I first started talking. They get it. Fast. Without clear vision, you'll wander to your next destination…it just won't be a preferred destination. You can't get "there" when you don't know what "there" looks like.

It's also ***compelling.*** It is not uncommon for people to share our passion when we share the vision. Some have read it on our website and made the decision to attend 7 City Church solely on the compelling nature of the vision. Others have heard me share the vision over a cup of coffee, or during a gathering with guests, and have been inspired to jump on board. The compelling nature of the vision is where problems and passions intersect.

Finally, the vision is ***concise.*** It's not a vision "paragraph." It isn't loaded with unnecessary verbs and adjectives, complicated theological terms, or overbearing

sentence structures. It's a vision "statement." It's short, concise, and to the point.

Having clarity actually makes your vision more powerful. It also makes it more enduring. Why? Because something can only endure if people understand it well enough to share it with others. Otherwise, the vision will remain trapped in the mind of the leader.

CASTING YOUR VISION

A great deal rides on a leader's ability to cast vision. Capturing a vision is the beginning, but the ability to effectively communicate the vision is essential if you want to inspire teams and catalyze forward movement. Unfortunately, leaders tend to complicate vision casting. Business author Dave Anderson observes that the key to effective vision casting is to keep it simple. He sites three examples:

- The Lord's prayer has 66 words in it
- The Gettysburg Address has 286 words
- The Declaration of Independence has 1,332 words

On the other hand, Anderson notes that the United States Department of Agriculture regulation on the sale of cabbage has 26,911 words. Simplicity makes the difference. People don't remember complicated messages.

In his book, *Making Vision Stick,* pastor Andy Stanley shares five things leaders must do to increase the adhesiveness of vision:

- **State the vision simply.**
- **Cast the vision convincingly.**
- **Repeat the vision regularly.**
- **Celebrate the vision systematically.**
- **Embrace the vision personally.**

If your vision doesn't make you sit up straight, bring inflection to your voice, cause your heart to race, and make you want to pound the table, then your vision has

no life. This isn't a matter of personality. It's a matter of passion. People are not inspired by a vision that's on life support. They must do more than hear it…they must *feel* it.

Furthermore, vision has a tendency to leak. People need to hear the vision regularly, not just during an annual "vision talk." It should be incorporated into messages, leadership development, guest classes, various media formats, and other valuable platforms. Most importantly, you, as the leader, should embody the vision. If your passions are reflected in the vision, this shouldn't be difficult.

Always remember that simple is better when it comes to vision. At the same time, the vision can't be a cliché that comes across hokey or insincere. Visions with substance are clear and compelling—like Nehemiah's vision in the Old Testament. His vision was a symbol of hope and dignity.

Finally, be prepared for criticism. Nehemiah's story is a stark reminder that vision attracts critics. If you want your vision to stay focused on "will do" rather than "won't do," choose a "will do" response to the critics. When people ask you, "Why don't we do (fill in the blank)?" answer them with vision, "Because we do…" You can honor the past, but be sure you're loyal to the future. Respond to "don't" questions with "do" answers.

Vision Formation Process

CAPTURING YOUR VISION

1. Soul-Stirring Questions

    - What questions in your soul are unsatisfied?
    - What questions are you asking about your community, the world, or a group of people in need?

2. Problems & Passions

    - What are the problems in your community (or world) that need to be solved?
    - What are you most passionate about?
    - What is your church most passionate about?
    - Which problem(s) intersects with your passion(s) and your church's passion(s)?
    - What would be an appropriate biblical response to these problems and passions?

3. Fasting & Prayer

    - How much time have you allotted in prayer to really capture a clear vision? Schedule additional time to truly seek the Lord.
    - What is God speaking to you as you pray about the vision of the church?

CLARIFYING YOUR VISION

4. Gather all of your thoughts, prayers, and reflection into a single journal or document. What are the themes that continually emerge?

5. Merge your themes into a single, clear, compelling, and concise vision statement.

6. Pray over the vision, revisit it after a few days, and make appropriate adjustments.

7. Test the vision with the following questions:
   - Is the vision God-inspired?
   - Are you personally inspired by the vision?
   - Does the vision meet a need, solve a problem, and make a difference in the world?
   - Can your church enthusiastically run with the vision?

CASTING YOUR VISION

8. Work with leaders to personally embrace and model the vision.

9. Develop a plan with key leaders to passionately communicate the vision using a variety of strategies.

10. Determine ways to repeat the vision regularly and celebrate the vision systematically.