

Leadership Letter 15

(Note: this is the 15th in a series of "Leadership Letters" that have been written in the last few months. You can read previous letters at our web-site. Go to www.GraceGlobalNetwork.org and look under the "encouragement" section.)

Focus

If any athlete was known for his ability to focus, it was Michael Jordan. Whether in the last minutes of a championship game, or simply a "friendly" game of Horse, Michael Jordan was intensely focused to win.

In Jordan's latest book, *Driven From Within*, Fred Whitfield tells a fascinating story about Jordan's focus. Fred is a friend of Jordan, and one night Jordan and Fred were going out for the evening. Michael asked Fred if he could borrow a jacket for the evening.

In Fred's closet he had two main types of clothes: Nike and Puma. The Nike outfits came as gifts from Jordan, and the Puma outfits came from Fred's relationship with another basketball player, Ralph Sampson. Both athletes had lucrative endorsement deals with those respective companies: Jordan with Nike and Sampson with Puma.

Fred recalls that Jordan walked into the living room and laid all of the Puma gear on the floor. Jordan then went to the kitchen, grabbed a butcher knife, and returned to the living room. He proceeded to destroy all of the Puma clothes with the knife, literally cutting them to shreds. He then picked up the scraps and carried everything to the dumpster.

Jordan came back inside and told Fred, "*Don't ever let me see you in anything other than Nike. You can't ride the fence.*" That's good advice.

You cannot ride the fence. You must be focused. As a ministry leader, you must envision the future and effectively communicate that vision to those you lead. There are several critical elements to remaining focused on the vision.

- 1. The vision must be clear.** Howard Hendricks has said, "*If there is a mist in the pulpit, there will be a fog in the pew.*" Communicate clearly. Repeat your vision consistently. Remember, vision leaks. You need to continually remind people why you are doing what you are doing.
- 2. The vision must be simple.** You can't remember something complex. Craft your vision statement to be simple and memorable. Papa John's makes great pizza. According to the founder, John Schattner, the secret to the company's success has been its simplicity. Look at this statement found on their web site:

At Papa John's we have a simple formula for success: Focus on one thing and try to do it better than anyone else. By keeping the Papa John's menu simple, we are able to focus on the quality of our product by using only superior-quality ingredients.

People have embraced the simple menu and the simple philosophy. What began as one store just over twenty years ago has mushroomed into the third largest pizza

franchise in the United States.

- 3. The vision must be singular.** Many churches have competing vision statements. Perhaps one comes from the worship team. Another from the youth ministry. Another from small groups, outreach or administration. Competing visions confuse people. When an unclear trumpet is sounded, the troops will not rally. Make sure *everyone* is on the same page. This starts with your staff. They may have theological agreement, but they must also have philosophical agreement.
- 4. The vision must be transferable.** Your staff must “get it” – but so must your small group leaders. Volunteers must be able to tell you why they are doing what they are doing.

The part about this that is so hard is that many of these volunteers have been active in other churches and come to your church with a pre-conceived philosophy, whether they can articulate it or not. You must make sure your leaders buy into your vision and can communicate it clearly. Ask (yea, even demand) all leaders go through your new members class and your ministry development classes. Many of you use a 101-201-301-401 system. Track people’s progress through those systems – and make sure they understand and agree with your vision and philosophy.

The first-century Pharisees were experts at complexity. They took the Law of Moses and codified it. They put parameters on how much work you could do on a Sabbath day. They listed all the exceptions possible to certain commands of God. They had it down.

But when an aggressive lawyer asked Jesus about His interpretation of the Law, Jesus said (and I’m paraphrasing here), *“It’s really quite simple. Don’t make it so complex. It boils down to this: love God supremely, and love your neighbor sacrificially.”* Now I don’t mean to suggest that keeping those commands is easy to do. But it is pretty easy to understand, isn’t it?

As opposed to the burdensome yoke of the Pharisees, Jesus said,

Matthew 11:28-30 *Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*

Jesus said His yoke is easy. His teaching was in stark contrast to the religious rabbis of the day. He was not offering a complicated and long set of rules, rituals and regulations. He was offering grace. He was offering a simple relationship with God.

And when Jesus gave His Great Commission to these same disciples, it only took three verses (Matthew 28:18-20), as compared to the three volumes that we might write today. It was clear. He kept it simple. He made it memorable. And it has been transferred down through twenty centuries to us today.

When doing consultations with church staff teams, Eric Geiger, author of *Simple Church*, sometimes will throw up a slide of Google’s homepage followed by a slide of Yahoo’s homepage. He will ask which example is most like the church he am meeting

with. Google's homepage is very simple. It is free of clutter. It averages 17 words. Yahoo's homepage is filled with everything. It averages 450-500 words. Big difference. And Google is dominating the search engine market. Some estimate that 75% of all Internet searches are done on Google.

The New York Times recently published an article that chronicled the problems and struggles at Yahoo. Executives viewed this as a public scathing. One Yahoo VP, Brad Garlinghouse, sent an email to all Yahoo employees. The email has been commonly referred to as the *Peanut Butter Manifesto*. The Wall Street Journal published it, and it is a candid look at how a great organization can become too complex and too scattered in focus. In the same way, many of our churches have become too complex. And we are making less and less of a difference in people's lives.

There is a lot to learn from this active case study, but here is the most telling part of Garlinghouse's email from my perspective...

We lack a focused, cohesive vision for our company. We want to do everything and be everything -- to everyone. We've known this for years, talk about it incessantly, but do nothing to fundamentally address it. We are scared to be left out. We are reactive instead of charting an unwavering course. We are separated into silos that far too frequently don't talk to each other. And when we do talk, it isn't to collaborate on a clearly focused strategy, but rather to argue and fight about ownership, strategies and tactics. Our inclination and proclivity to repeatedly hire leaders from outside the company results in disparate visions of what winning looks like -- rather than a leadership team rallying around a single cohesive strategy. I've heard our strategy described as spreading peanut butter across the myriad opportunities that continue to evolve in the online world. The result: a thin layer of investment spread across everything we do and thus we focus on nothing in particular. I hate peanut butter. We all should.

Some key points for the church:

- 1. There must be one overarching cohesive vision for the church.** Too often, as churches get larger, they become a bunch of sub-churches fighting over the same resources. *Ministry Schizophrenia* is a real disease, and it is plaguing many churches.
- 2. The more programs a church does the less important each one of them becomes.** Energy, focus, and resources get spread thinly across all programs.
- 3. It is easy to become complex and complicated.** We must fight to stay simple so that we can make the biggest impact possible.

Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, the authors of *Simple Church*, encourage churches to utilize worship services to connect people to God, small groups to connect people to others, and ministry/volunteer opportunities to connect people to ministry. We must avoid the temptation to become complicated. This means, like Google, we must say "no" to a lot of good things. For Yahoo, profits are on the line. For the church, eternity is on the line.