

Vision Leaks

How do you keep the church's passion for ministry from deflating?

Andy Stanley

Vision doesn't stick; it doesn't have natural adhesive. Instead, vision leaks. You've repeated the vision for your church a hundred times. Then someone will ask a question that makes you think, *What happened? Didn't they hear what we've said over and over? Don't they know what this church is all about?*

You can spot leakage by listening for three things:

1. *Prayer requests.* What people pray for will tell you more than anything else whether they are locked into the vision and priorities of the church. When you are in a leadership meeting, are the only prayer requests for sick people? When I'm in such a meeting, I say, "Whoa, is anybody in this group burdened for an unchurched or unsaved friend? Yes, let's pray for the sick people. Now, what else can we pray for?"

2. *Stories of great things happening in people's lives.* If there are no stories, then maybe the vision for life transformation has leaked.

3. *What people complain about.* If people are complaining about the wrong stuff, then vision is leaking. When they complain about the music, or the parking, or that the church is too big, or there are too many people they don't know, you can respond, "I know. God is blessing us." But it's a sign of vision leakage.

I am often tempted to get frustrated with the people who don't understand the vision, but I have to ask myself some important questions. What do I need to do to assure that we have a compelling vision as an organization, and what must I do to make sure it doesn't leak? If the vision is not communicated in a compelling way, then the organization is going to be unfocused. Wherever focus is lacking, only random activity is left. That's when you wake up and find you don't like the organization you're leading.

It's our job as leaders to get everyone oriented and focused on our main purpose.

What causes leaks?

There are three reasons vision seeps away: success, failure, and everything in between.

Success means your options multiply. Size increases complexity, and complexity can confuse vision.

Our church was at its most efficient when there were just six of us sitting around the table. Everybody knew and understood everything. It was as smart and

efficient as the organization has ever been. This efficiency leads to success, and success gives birth to complexity, the enemy of efficiency and vision. Many churches become successful organizations where everyone is busy, but they've lost connection with the vision.

Failure will also knock a hole in your vision, if you let it. When a plan or strategy fails, people are tempted to assume it was the wrong vision. Plans and strategies can always be changed and improved. But vision doesn't change. Visions are simply refined with time.

Our first fundraising campaign was a total failure. No money came in, and I didn't follow up or follow through. One day a wonderful lady in our church came up and asked, "Andy, how's it going with the fundraising?" I answered, "It's not going very well at all." She said, "Do you think God's trying to tell us something?"

She clearly was implying that since the plan wasn't working, then the vision for this church must be wrong.

But I knew the vision was right, so I said, "Yes, I think God is trying to tell us something. He's trying to tell us it was a terrible fundraising idea."

We don't have to change the vision because a plan doesn't work out.

You know what else is tough on vision? Life. Every single day of my life works against the vision. Vision is about what could be and should be; life is about right-this-minute. Life is about the kids and the laundry and the doctor and the house payment.

No wonder vision leaks. Monday comes along and rips it off the wall. The urgent and legitimate needs of today can cause us to lose our vision.

In church life, nothing unfocuses us faster than haphazard, "y'all come" programming. Everybody has a favorite program. But adding too many programs to the church schedule will de-focus your church like nothing else.

So we ask hard questions of each potential program: Is this event a step toward maturity, or just more programming? Unless it makes a clear contribution to maturity and life transformation, it will likely become a vision leak.

There are three things you need to do in order to make your vision stick.

Repetition: good, good, good

None of us casts vision enough. Why? Because we think we've already said these things.

Every time I do our January sermon series on vision, I try not to look at last year's notes, but it ends up being the same message anyway. As a communicator

I feel the need to come up with something fresh and new. Yet originality is not needed here.

For vision to stick, it has to be cast over and over and over and over, and not just over and over.

Watch your timing

Be strategic about when you cast vision. Obviously, Labor Day weekend is not a good Sunday.

At North Point, we take two or three Sundays every January to reiterate what is vitally important and explain why we do what we're doing.

We also have a period in May or June, just before school is out, when we spend three weeks on "Strategic Service." I cast the vision for volunteers. I talk about mission, vision, values, and what's coming up next fall. It's also the time we recruit leaders for the upcoming school year.

Cast strategically

Whether it's across the table with a church leader, at a planning retreat, or talking to the whole church—every time you talk about what could be and should be, you're casting vision.

For instance, every one of my newsletter articles is vision oriented. I don't write devotional thoughts—those I can give on Sundays. If people are going to read a newsletter, I want every article to remind them of our mission and vision.

When we talk about the vision, it needs to be in a way that's clear and compelling to those we are addressing. Three components help me keep the vision compelling:

1. Define the problem. You must ask the question, *What problem is my organization attempting to solve?* There is something that will not get done if we don't do it. If we don't do what we do, there's a group of people that won't be reached. When you talk about vision, you need to begin by talking about why your church exists. What is the problem that God has called you to solve?

2. Offer a solution. Your vision is the solution to a problem, and when you can couple a problem that people feel emotionally with a clear solution, you are on your way to capturing their hearts. Then you can also capture a piece of their time and effort. Is your vision for your church a solution to a problem?

3. Present an urgent reason. In other words, answer the questions, *Why must we do this? And why must we do it now?*

I'll never forget when we started North Point. Most of the people who came to our

initial meeting about starting a church passed about a dozen churches on their way. What do you say when you stand up in front of those people and tell them about starting another church?

Some natural questions have to be faced: Why in the world are you starting another church? What is it that's not being done that needs to be done? What can we do about it? And why are we the ones to move in that direction?

So I talked about the need for "relevant environments" where lost and disillusioned people could connect with their Heavenly Father. I explained that it wasn't God who turned people off, it was usually a person's previous experiences with the church. Our vision was to create a safe, relevant place for lost people and Christians to bring their lost friends. The reason for the *now* was simply the urgency for people to come to Christ, not knowing when He will return.

I had to answer those questions so clearly that everybody who heard me talk about starting this church knew "Andy's going to do it anyway."

With clear answers to those questions, something comes alive in people, and the vision drives them to contribute their time, talents, and treasure.

If you can develop a phrase that you can say over and over to your people, whether it's across the lunch table or in your sermons, then you are on your way to casting vision.

At North Point, we put it this way: "Our mission is to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ by creating environments where people are encouraged and equipped to pursue intimacy with God, community with insiders, and influence with outsiders."

Learn to celebrate the vision

Many churches never stop to celebrate, and they're missing a great—and fun—opportunity to reinforce the vision. Celebration is what puts skin on the vision. I received one of those great e-mails from a lady in our church. It brought tears to my eyes. She wrote: "In your talk last Sunday you spoke about the impact that small group leaders have on the children in their group. I wanted to let you know about my son's small group leader. My son Graham is in the fifth grade and his group leader is Greg.

"As you know, Greg was called into active service as a part of the Iraqi freedom mission. Greg was sent to Italy, then Turkey, and then to an aircraft carrier. But did that stop him from being concerned about the members of his small group? No. Greg sent e-mails from Turkey to the kids in his group, telling what was doing and asking how the kids were doing. He even went so far as to call Graham from Turkey."

Did that have an impact? It sure did! Greg cared enough about his small group

members to keep in contact while in a war zone. It made me think. What do you do with an e-mail like that? You celebrate it!

So on Strategic Service Sunday, I talked about serving in the local church and the opportunity to get involved. I used all my persuasion skills because we needed to enlist lots of volunteers in the following three weeks to staff our fall programs.

During that service I said, "Let me read you an e-mail from one of our volunteers."

Since Greg was back home by then, I'd asked him to sit in the front row wearing his military uniform. I read the e-mail. People were visibly moved.

Then I said, "Greg, would you stand?" And people applauded. After that service, more people volunteered than we could have imagined.

Nothing gives definition to vision like celebrating victories.

Baptism is another great opportunity to celebrate. In order to be baptized in our church, in addition to acknowledging a personal Christian faith, each person must do a two to three-minute videotaped testimony that we play in the service right before the baptism.

This is their opportunity to tell their story to the whole congregation. We encourage them to share what God has done in their life. One will say, "I was lost and somebody invited me to North Point. I came, I trusted Christ, and now I'm in a small group." Then they are baptized, and their small group stands and cheers. That embodies the vision. Almost every Sunday we find a way to celebrate, hoot and holler, yell and scream.

Once a year isn't enough. Spontaneously isn't enough. You must celebrate the vision over and over.

Learn to live it

Your willingness to embody the vision of your organization has a direct impact on your credibility as a leader. The moment you begin to look for ways to celebrate something that's not happening in your own life, people will know. One of the things that my wife Sandra and I are committed to is developing relationships with unchurched friends.

My oldest son, Andrew, is 11. He was selected to be on an All-Star baseball team this spring. This community baseball team was our mission field, and we were there to be an influence, to connect with and pray for the kids on the team and their parents.

As the season went on, Andrew wasn't getting much playing time. Occasionally he'd be put in right field. The coaches promised to play him but rarely did. He

tried to be strong, but his heart would break every time.

At one point, we had won enough games to qualify for the state finals. One night as they played the remaining, relatively meaningless, regular season game and were losing 12-3, Andrew was still warming the bench. Eventually the coach put him in right field. Then, just before Andrew was due to bat, the coach pulled him out for another batter.

There was my son, batting helmet on, having to trot back to the bench in a game that didn't matter.

I felt a level of anger I had never experienced as an adult.

I got up and went around to the other side of the ball field to nurse my anger. I was thinking of what I was going to say to the coaches. There was no excuse for this!

Then, just as the game was about to end, a guy behind me said, "Andy."

I turned around. He told me his name and started talking. I'm thinking, *Look ... I'm focused. I'm angry. I'm rehearsing my speech.*

"Andy, I just got to tell you," he said, "I hadn't been to church in over 30 years. But my wife started going to North Point, and she started trying to get me to come."

As he's telling me this story, inside I'm thinking, *Oh no you don't, Lord. I came over here to be mad! This may be Andrew's last game. Nobody treats my son this way! And you are not going to mess me up with this unchurched person.*

He went on and on. The game was over. He shared about how he'd been coming to North Point and had begun to read his Bible, joined a small group Bible study, and his life had changed.

I know I was supposed to be happy, but I didn't want to hear it because I couldn't wait to go over and lecture the coach. But as he talked, I felt like God was embracing me. *Remember why you're here. Remember. Remember.*

After the game, both teams were supposed to go for ice cream. I was thinking, *I'm not going. I can't face those coaches.* But Andrew wanted to be with his team, so we got the whole family in the car. I was still steaming; I couldn't even talk.

Nine-year-old Garret picked up on my emotions. "I can't believe the coach," he said, "I can't believe it!"

I can't describe how close I was to losing it, but the reality of the situation finally

dawned on me.

By God's grace I said to my family: "Didn't we decide this spring we're not here because of baseball? Right, Andrew? I think that maybe something good will come from this. We can't quit, because this isn't about baseball." And I made myself get some ice cream.

Not long ago I saw one of the coaches and his family in the third row of our church. In a meeting with the coaches and parents at the season's end, the coach praised Andrew for his attitude and said the rest of the team needed to have the same attitude.

But I can't describe how close I was to losing it that night.

Life is brutal on vision. It can cause serious vision leakage. But if we as leaders can live through the stuff of life to maintain a focus on the vision, our people will, too.

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