

DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF PLANNING

BY TONY MORGAN



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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to making decisions around internal systems and processes, planning for growth, budgeting, staff expansion, and strategic ministry development, some churches and leaders would rather opt out of such activities. They worry that such activities will limit God. Inadvertently, they end up limiting themselves.

If the worship leader puts frameworks around a worship service, does that limit God? No.

If the teaching pastor studies Scripture and prepares the message to be preached, does that limit God? Of course not.

If the small group leader reviews Bible study material in advance of a gathering, does that limit God? Certainly not.

Consider these examples:

1. Some churches (or people) are stuck because they fail to get perspective. They are afraid to acknowledge their current condition.
2. Some churches (or people) are stuck because they don't put their plan into action. They are unwilling to do the hard work of being disciplined and monitoring their progress.
3. Some churches (or people) are stuck because they fail to plan. They assume if they hope and pray for a better future, they can cling to past practices and still find success.

The first two examples are leaders with a plan, but either they failed to act on it or they didn't develop a plan that fit their ministry context. But the third example—the leader without a defined plan—is the one most at risk. This leader is most likely the one who will experience the greatest amount of frustration, setbacks, and surprises in their ministry.

Without a plan, it is easy to feel helpless. You know something isn't right, but you aren't sure how to identify the root of the problem.

Others have a plan that has never produced results. Yet they continue trying to implement that plan, hoping it will eventually turn around. In his book *Necessary Endings*, Dr. Henry Cloud reminds us that "Hope is not a strategy." The same broken plan with more hope will never produce a bigger impact.

The truth is, hope is a terrible strategy to grow, develop, and multiply what God has entrusted to us as leaders. Too much is at stake. This is why developing a theology of planning is critical to ensure life change continues to be a natural byproduct of the decisions we make, buildings we build, and ministry investments we allocate.

I want to share with you what I have learned about planning and how it can and will shape your ministry both now and in the years ahead. I challenge you to set aside your own preconceived ideas about planning—at least for the length of time it takes you to flip through this eBook. I believe *Developing a Theology of Planning* will clarify a lot of things for you and help you and your ministry experience a new level of health.

These are exciting days for churches and leaders. A plan doesn't limit God. In fact, I believe just the opposite. A plan intensifies and accelerates what God is already doing as we work to fulfill his mission in our lives and our churches.

PART ONE

WHY LEADERS RESIST PLANNING



It's better to be wise than strong; intelligence outranks muscle any day. Strategic planning is the key to warfare; to win, you need a lot of good counsel.

Proverbs 25:5–6 (MSG)

There are times when God sends someone up a mountain and that person comes down with a vision from God printed on stone tablets. But that is not common. Yet, I see far too many leaders who discount and debate the need for planning. They're waiting for God to deliver the stone tablets.

Of course, there are a lot of reasons to resist planning. We've all convinced ourselves from time to time that the effort and energy required for good planning just wasn't worth it. Yet no matter how much the value of good planning is discounted, it is absolutely essential to your leadership and your ability to continue to advance toward the vision God has given you.

One of the benefits I have is the opportunity to interact with leaders all over the country (and even a few abroad). I do my best to make as many observations as possible—because I believe we can and should learn from each other—and these are some common approaches I've observed when it comes to ministry planning:

The Moses Complex

The first and most common approach to planning I observe in churches is what I call the "Moses Complex." In churches that embrace this practice, everyone waits for the pastor to receive a vision, and then all the staff "leaders" are responsible for executing the vision God gives the senior pastor. The problem with this practice is that it's based on broken theology and leads to an unhealthy and dysfunctional leadership culture.

Leaders who practice a Moses-style leadership almost always end up allowing a lack of accountability or wise counsel to lead to poor decisions and ultimately their demise as effective leaders. Additionally, this style of leadership doesn't allow others to speak into the vision or strategy for the church.

Planning Is Best Kept Between God and the Leader

Good planning is not a solitary activity. What may seem efficient isn't necessarily effective. I'm convinced that effective leaders are less self-sustaining and more like architects who consider both form and function. Some leaders simply forget the need to get input from others.

I don't believe leaders do this intentionally. I think they believe they are operating as God intended. But from the beginning, God didn't want humans to live alone. We were designed to live—and lead—in community. We should never do leadership alone. The best planners recognize the value of getting input and feedback from others throughout the process.

I've always found it fascinating that Solomon, the wisest king to ever rule Israel, understood the value of getting advice from other people. If God had already gifted him with wisdom, why did he pursue advice from others? It seems like it would have been appropriate for Solomon to say, "My wisdom and understanding comes directly from God. I will make decisions about my next steps based on that wisdom alone."

Even though Solomon was the wisest man in the world, he understood the value of receiving advice from others. For example, in Proverbs, Solomon offered:

- *"Instruct the wise, and they will be even wiser. Teach the righteous, and they will learn even more" (9:9).*
- *"Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers" (11:14).*
- *"Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to others" (12:15).*
- *"Plans go wrong for the lack of advice; many advisers bring success" (15:22).*
- *"Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life" (19:20).*
- *"Plans succeed through good counsel; don't go to war without wise advice" (20:18).*

God granted Solomon wisdom, and part of that wisdom from God was that we need to seek wise advice from others. That's not how I would handle things if I were God. If I were God, I would say, *"Wisdom comes from me alone. Don't listen to the advice of others."*

God's design is different. Because of that, everyone benefits when the leader takes time to get input and feedback from others. This ensures the best decision is made and that no one is left behind in the process.

Asking Too Many Questions Minimizes the Senior Leader

Leaders should ask good questions. Some of the best leaders in history were slow to make declarative edicts but quick to research, question, and explore all available options. This is the only way to maximize present opportunities.

The toughest choices are not between good and bad. The most difficult decisions are when a leader must decide between better and best. This must be done carefully and warrants a period of research, prayer, and evaluation.

You may think that asking too many questions is similar to operating with a Moses Complex. The key difference is that the Moses Complex is about the relationship of the senior leader to the people while this objection is based on the perspective of other leaders to the senior leader. How do people under a senior leader view, interact, and react to leadership above them?

At the risk of not showing honor to peers in ministry, I want to tackle something that might make me unpopular. But I'm concerned. I see a trend in churches that I think is unhealthy. Honestly, I believe it's also unbiblical. This issue has to do with honor.

Romans 12:10 tells us to *"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor"* (ESV).

God designed honor to flow in both directions. That's not what I'm seeing in churches today. Some churches are trying to create a culture where all the underlings are supposed to honor their senior pastors by serving their every need, by guarding them from the congregation, and by always saying yes to all their requests among other things. Supporting your senior pastor is one thing. But when it creeps into making the pastor the "king," it's a completely different deal.

My fear is that this "culture of honor" trend plays right into the sin of pride. And that leads to the general feeling that asking the senior leader to craft or submit to a planning process, is—in effect—not honorable.

But God did not design the pastor to be the rock star. God charged pastors to equip God's people to do the work of God. When an unhealthy "culture of honor" is promoted, God's people wait for "God's man" to do the work of God. This is not a healthy and sustainable ministry plan.

It's Never Been Done That Way Before

Never underestimate the power of what's familiar, accessible, and known to lure leaders away from God's direction. This often is expressed when leaders refuse to let go of something. Our greatest times of fear come when leaders must push through the unknown and get beyond what is familiar. Yet it is the unknown that often leads to our greatest and most significant ministry breakthroughs.

It's easy to get into a rhythm and flow of doing ministry. I see this most often when churches experience success. They hold on to the past because it produced success... in the past.

Who we are as leaders in Christ doesn't change. The primary mission of the church never changes. Everything we do as leaders and churches must be on the table—all the time.

In planning, the goal is to understand where you are, where you want to be, and define how you'll get there. If you're headed into unknown territory, then you'll have to give up some things that are familiar to achieve something different.

I don't think leaders even recognize they act in this way sometimes. A key indicator that you might be unwilling to let something go is to look at your non-negotiables. Unless they are fundamentally essential to the integrity of our faith, then they are simply methods. And methods and plans must adapt and change over time because churches—like any organization—operate in a dynamic environment. This requires planning.

It Involves Hard Work

Good planning involves blood, sweat, and tears. (Okay, maybe the blood part is a little extreme.) But I think you get my point. Planning can feel consuming and often creates the feeling of standing still rather than moving forward. It's worth it, though. It ensures you don't waste momentum once you decide which direction to move.

Change is not easy. The longer you do something the same way, the more resistant you become to making a shift. But that doesn't mean planning is inherently flawed. It simply means that we have to make room in our busy schedules to do the things necessary to ensure that we don't confuse activity with progress.

Built within the fabric of planning is the idea that the direction we are headed has known realities. That means our actions can be defined, measured, and refined. The most difficult work involved in the planning process is having to say no to a lot of good things that you could do so you can say yes to the things that God has uniquely positioned you to accomplish.

* * *

Planning is not a substitute for ministry. It is the thread that runs throughout it. As leaders, we have a great deal of responsibility to God and to the people who participate in our community. The only way we can be sure we are making the most of the people and resources God has brought to us is to plan. If we do not plan, I believe we do not honor God. This is an issue of stewardship.

We need to pray for and trust God to provide wisdom. We need to be strategic in our planning before we head into battle. We need to seek good counsel as we develop that plan. (By the way, ministry without planning lacks faith and is not biblical.)

Leadership gets lonely if we are waiting for the stone tablets. God may have already provided the vision, but it is the leader's responsibility to uncover the plan to bring that vision to life.

PART TWO

THE ADVANTAGED OF DOING MINISTRY WITHOUT A PLAN

A goal without a plan is just a wish.
Antoine de Saint-Exupery



I've run into people in and out of ministry who take pride in the fact that they don't plan. They insist they're relying solely on God to move. Ironically, not having a plan is the same as having a plan. Don't believe me? Read on.

Several years ago, I stopped in Nothing, Arizona. You've probably not heard of Nothing, Arizona, because it's essentially... nothing. This sign hangs in the center of the town:

Town of Nothing, Arizona
Founded 1977, Elevation 3269 ft.

The staunch citizens of Nothing are full of Hope, Faith, and Believe in the work ethic. Thru the years these dedicated people had faith in Nothing, hoped for Nothing, worked at Nothing, for Nothing.

Clearly, the people of Nothing had a vision for Nothing that involved nothing. If you ever visit Nothing, you'll find a gas station called the All Mart and a couple of trailers. That's it. For the town of Nothing, nothing was their vision, and it resulted in *nothing*.

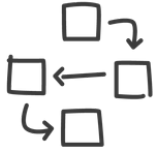
In other words, not having a plan is the same as having a plan for nothing.

Beyond that, though, you need to understand that not planning has consequences. For example, when you don't have a plan:

- You give the loudest person, regardless of their spiritual maturity or commitment to the church's mission, the opportunity to influence what happens in your ministry.
- You push your sharpest, most capable leaders away. Because they are used to organizations with clearly defined plans for future growth, they won't stick around your church.
- You fuel more debate as people argue about what to do next.

- You fuel more debate as people argue about what to do next.
- You need to hold more meetings. Without a clearly defined plan, you have to meet more often to decide what's next.
- You encourage division. Even though you committed to the same mission, failure to establish strategy will lead to splits within the church.
- You make it difficult to celebrate what God is doing in your church. Without goals, it's difficult for people to know what success looks like.
- You eliminate the need to discern God's will. Failure to plan requires you to sit back and wait on God when God may be waiting for you to move.
- You make it difficult for people to know how to pray. And without specific, faith-stretching prayers, there's no challenge for people to rely on God's power.
- You limit the financial contributions to your ministry. People give to organizations that actually have a plan—a big plan—for the money they invest.

Talking about this gets me especially fired up. Not because I think every leader should see things as I do. Instead, I believe the responsibility that church leaders have is great and comes with a significant amount of accountability. Again, this is an issue of stewardship. That's why I'm challenging you to create a plan that will ensure the church you lead doesn't end up like Nothing.



PART THREE

PLANNING IS BIBLICAL

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.

Proverbs 15:22

I'm really not a fan of theological debates. Generally, I don't find them helpful to our cause. However, we can't build a theology of planning without considering the principles we find in Scripture. With that, let's dig into God's Word to see what it has to say on this matter.

At the very core of planning is faith. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is the confidence in what we hope for and the assurance of what we do not see." When God gives the leaders of his church a vision or direction, our faith (confidence) that such a vision is possible is directly related to our willingness to enter into a time of planning and preparation.

Faith is fundamentally part of planning—religious or not. Why? Because it is grounded in the belief that what has not yet happened is attainable. Therefore, it is worthy of our time and attention to better understand how to get there.

Planning is like building a fire. If you have ever built a fire, you know how vital it is to arrange the wood in a way that the oxygen can flow through the wood as it's burning. Without arranging the wood properly, the fire will never burn as it should. You can light it, but it will only smolder.

Planning is also an act of obedience—an "arranging" of the wood—so when the fire from God lights the wood, the wind of God's Spirit can flow through the wood and the fire can blaze and provide the light and heat that God intended. Without God's fire you only have a well-arranged stack of wood. But if we do not do our part, even when the fire from God comes, the result will rarely be the blaze that God intended.

Planning is an act of faith done by a person that so believes the fire of God is coming, that he or she has arranged the wood in a way that the fire will blaze as God intended.

Consider these passages that speak directly about planning:

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, "This person began to build and wasn't able to finish." (Luke 14:28-30 NIV)

But the noble make noble plans, and by noble deeds they stand. (Isaiah 32:8 NIV)

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways." (Haggai 1:5-7 NIV)

Who gives intuition to the heart and instinct to the mind? (Job 38:36)

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.

The servant who received the five bags of silver began to invest the money and earned five more. The servant with two bags of silver also went to work and earned two more. But the servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master's money.

After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money. The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of silver came forward with five more and said, "Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I have earned five more."

The master was full of praise. "Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!"

The servant who had received the two bags of silver came forward and said, "Master, you gave me two bags of silver to invest, and I have earned two more."

The master said, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!"

Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn't plant and gathering crops you didn't cultivate. I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back."

But the master replied, "You wicked and lazy servant! If you knew I harvested crops I didn't plant and gathered crops I didn't cultivate, why didn't you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it."

Then he ordered, "Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver. To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away. Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 25:14-30)

This passage reminds us once again that planning is stewardship. If we do nothing with what God has given us, he will likely take it away.

There is an overwhelming amount of Scripture that supports planning. And I think most leaders would agree that vision must be translated into an action plan. Otherwise, the best of intentions will become the regrets of tomorrow.

But I think there are still three important questions worth addressing:

1. How do I know my plans are from God?

This is a fair question. I don't think there is a simple answer for it. Here are some questions you can use to evaluate if your plans are from God:

- What is God saying to you through prayer?
- Do my plans contradict or confirm Scripture?
- Am I receiving confirmation from other leaders around me?
- Do I have all the information and perspective I need to construct the best plan?
- What questions are still unanswered?

- Have I outlined a series of smaller goals to chart my progress?
- Have you carefully considered the impact of not moving forward with your plan?

If God has called you to lead his church, then he will also confirm your next steps. That doesn't mean we don't do the hard work of planning. That goes back to the faith issues we talked about earlier. But the amazing thing God has always done for me when tough decisions needed to be made was confirm, in a variety of ways, the direction in which I was headed. I know he will do the same for you too.

2. What if God changes my plans?

If there is one thing that is absolutely true about planning, it is that plans change. Sometimes it is the result of changing conditions around us. Sometimes we encounter circumstances no one could have anticipated. But just because plans may change doesn't mean that we shouldn't plan. That logic doesn't add up. There must be a balance between planning and flexibility.

3. What if my plans fail?

Hidden within this question is a fear that most leaders carry with them: failure. No leader wants to have his or her plans fail. It's difficult, uncomfortable, and frustrating—especially when you've thrown yourself and all you have into something.

The good news is that sometimes plans fail and sometimes they succeed. We can learn from both situations. But if our heart is right, intentions pure, and efforts complete, then we have to trust God to do the rest. Remember, "Unless the Lord builds a house, the work of the builders is wasted" (Psalm 127:1).

God wants his church to succeed. If we will keep our eyes focused on eternal things like life change, loving God, and loving others, then God will work through us to accomplish the vision he has given to us.

Planning may not come naturally to you, but that doesn't mean God doesn't want to stretch you in new ways and help you become a better, more effective leader.

PART FOUR

THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR PLANNING



Someone's sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.
Warren Buffet

In every gathering of leaders, there always seems to be a wise guy. I'm not talking about the funniest guy in the room. I'm talking about the leader who seems to have a grounded perspective on just about everything.

Early on, I thought these people had special insight or wisdom from God. And maybe some of them do. But more often than not, I have realized these leaders are wise because of the people they surround themselves with. Most of them would likely tell you about some specific moments that would have been a complete disaster if they had simply trusted their gut.

I'm not sure where the expectation came from that placed an unrealistic burden on leaders to know it all and have all the answers. Perhaps we have convinced ourselves of something that isn't true—or even possible.

Effective leaders get advice and input from others. And this is exactly what the process of planning facilitates.

Recently, I was reading the account of King Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chronicles 10. The irony of Rehoboam's story is that he was the son of Solomon. As he transitioned into power, he needed to determine how he was going to rule his people. Initially, Rehoboam sought the advice of his elders. The older, more-experienced advisers told the king to be kind to the people. If so, the people would remain faithful and would always be the king's servants.

Then Rehoboam sought the counsel of a different group of advisers. They were younger men who had grown up with the king. One could argue that since they were so close to Rehoboam, they told the king what he wanted to hear. Their advice was different. They encouraged the king to treat the people harsher. They encouraged the king to make the burden even heavier.

Rehoboam made a poor decision. He followed the direction of the younger, less-experienced advisers. As a result of that decision, the people of Israel rebelled against his leadership. What's fascinating is that this passage says his poor choice was "from God." Isn't it interesting? Since Rehoboam distanced himself from the heart of God, God allowed Rehoboam to make a poor decision and face the consequences.

As Christ followers, we have the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in us. John 14:26 says the Holy Spirit "will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you." It's as if we're receiving wisdom directly from God. If I were God, I'd say, "The Holy Spirit is sufficient. There's no need for seeking the advice of others."

Yet that's not God's design. He designed us to teach others. He designed us to be in relationship with others. He designed us to mentor others. He designed us to learn from others. We see examples of this throughout Scripture. Wisdom comes from God, but it often comes through the counsel of others.

If I were God, I'd just tell people what to do and expect them to do it. In my world, it would be very easy to determine right from wrong. In such a situation, though, we wouldn't experience the joy of learning from the experience and wisdom of those around us. We'd miss out on the reward and the sense of accomplishment of the learning process. We wouldn't experience the relational benefits from leaning on others. We wouldn't reflect the nature of God, because we wouldn't be creative. We'd be rule followers. Following rules is easy, but that's not the way God designed us.

Does wisdom come from God? Yes, but God uses other people to impart his wisdom. And, for reasons we may never understand, he allows us to choose who we will listen to and who we will ignore.

Because of that, the importance of discerning who is in our circle of influence is elevated. It forces me to ask these questions:

- What does the Bible say?
- What does my spouse say?
- What does my team say?
- What do the experienced experts say?

If Solomon was so wise, maybe we ought to learn from him. Rather than asking, “What should I do?” Maybe we should focus on, “Who should I ask?” In other words, we need to look around us and determine... “Who’s the wise guy?” Yes, the person ultimately responsible and accountable for crafting a ministry plan is the senior leader. But that doesn’t mean senior leaders should do everything on their own. In fact, that feels more like a plot to maintain control than a plan for healthy ministry impact.

PART FIVE

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PLANNING?



*In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but
planning is indispensable.*

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Building a ministry plan is essentially designing a strategic operating system for your church. Ideally, the end result should be delivered within a concentrated period of time and should also be able to be implemented quickly.

A plan without implementation is just a waste of time. But what are the ingredients for good planning? There are a number of different approaches to building a ministry plan. But context is essential. This is why one plan doesn't fit every church. Your ministry plan should be yours—not borrowed and patched together from other churches you want to be.

The clearest path to ministry effectiveness is for you to be the church God has called you to be within your community. Someone else's plan shouldn't just become your plan. It won't work.

These characteristics of good planning will help you contextualize your ministry setting so your plan accurately reflects your church. Ministry context should also help you uncover the unique ways God has given you to serve your ministry.

- **Your plan should be developed as a team, collaboratively across all ministries.** Churches tend to operate in silos. When you develop a plan collaboratively, you are trying to get everyone moving in the same direction.
- **You must know where you start before you can determine where you're going.** Simply put, you have to find perspective before you plan. Think about a family road trip. You have to know where you're headed to determine which path to take and to ensure that you arrive at your intended destination.
- **You must look at the past to see the signature of the church. What has God blessed in the past?** What do we value from our past? We need to embrace the value or blessing—not necessarily the method. For example, the church may embrace the value of reaching

people outside the church and outside the faith. That's a value that's been demonstrated through past ministry initiatives. But the past practice of using door-to-door evangelism may not be the most effective method for the future. Hold tightly to your values, but hold loosely to your practices.

- **You need to determine what is distinctive about the church.** What has God uniquely positioned your ministry to accomplish? Where is the current impact? What if we spent more of our time in those areas? It's a good thing when churches focus their energy and resources to reach unique groups of people.
- **You must maintain a bias toward action.** Are you implementing your plans? Planning is important, but it is not a substitute for action. The best planning is done by people who live in the trenches of ministry. Action without a plan can be destructive. Planning without action is a waste of time.
- **Your plan will require continuous managing, monitoring, and modifications.** What tools are you using today to measure, monitor, and modify your plan? Is your plan defined enough that it can be measured? Ideas are tough to monitor and manage. But when you assign action steps to your plan, a sense of progress becomes easier to maintain and your destination becomes much simpler to predict.
- **You must let your plan keep the big picture before you.** How can you be sure execution doesn't become a substitute for strategic planning? It's easy to get lost in the details of execution. Only a few people in your church will ever understand the big picture. Your plan serves as a silent accountability partner to ensure everyone continues to move in the same direction without being derailed by unanticipated distraction or inadvertent diversions.

We live in a time of perpetual innovation, which places an even greater demand on leaders to plan well. Applying these characteristics will ensure your planning helps you continue to move past the inevitable hurdles you will face as you grow. These characteristics won't guarantee success, but they will ensure that you have the discipline and habits to know when and how things are happening... and to know what to do next.

PART SIX

HOW GOOD PLANNING BENEFITS YOUR LEADERSHIP



The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.
Proverbs 21:5

Every church is unique. That means every plan is different. This is why process is important. If it was as easy as 1-2-3, believe me I would just give it to you. But it's not. So I guess you could say we are in this together.

But there are some principles that remain true in almost every church and context. These principles are based on my work within positions of ministry leadership as well as in secular leadership positions. The funny thing about secular organizations is that they aren't run much differently when it comes to planning. What's different, of course, is the intended outcomes.

If you're anything like me, I like to know how I'm going to benefit from something that is going to take time, effort, and energy away from other things I'm currently doing. It's basic cost-benefit analysis. Is giving up something else to take on a formal approach to ministry planning worth it? I think so.

Time is something most leaders don't have. That means leaders must spend their time on the things that only they can do. They have to invest in efforts that can and will create the greatest impact.

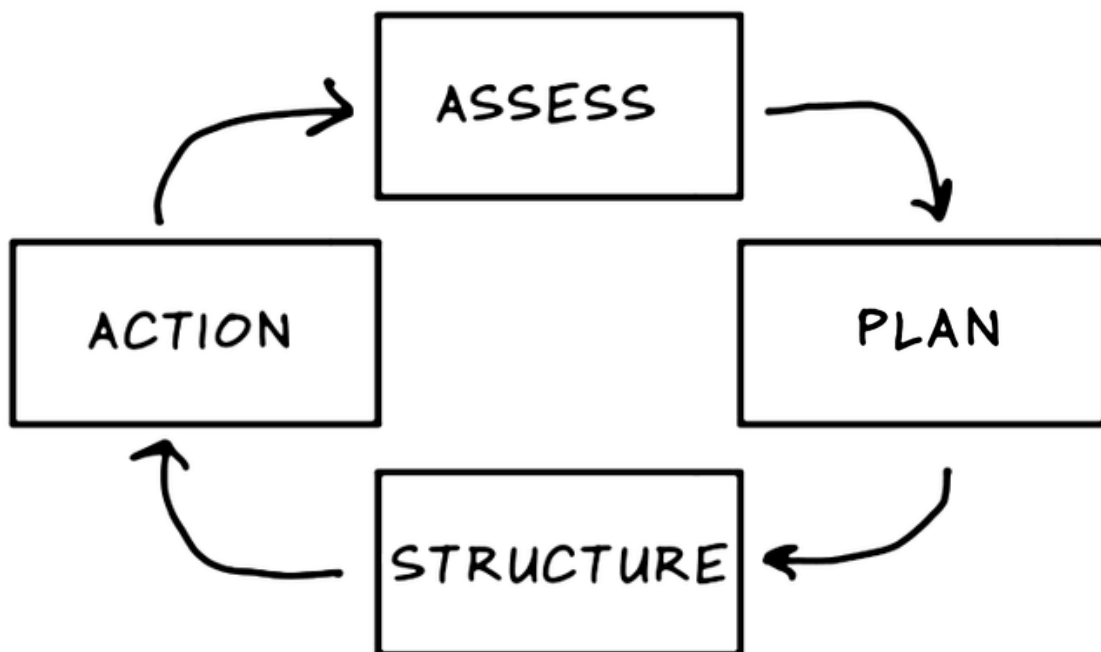
The most significant reality of leadership is accountability. It's not that accountability doesn't happen at other levels within any organization. But the leader is accountable not only to the people of the church but also the work for everyone else within the church. This is why it is absolutely essential that you have a well-defined ministry plan to ensure you meet your goals, achieve your vision, and avoid the sticky conversations that result from missed expectations.

If you choose to adopt a theology of planning, I want you to know exactly what you can expect from it. Our consulting group uses what we call "the Unstuck process" to facilitate planning with churches. It's designed to empower ministry teams to lead and manage churches as systems comprised of multiple programs, ministries, and functions. The process guides teams

to clarify their mission, vision, values, and core discipleship strategies... and then to create the right structure and accountability to realize it through prioritized action initiatives.

Your church is a complete organism, so you should look at it as a whole entity, not a collection of departments or individuals doing their own thing. You are a church. You are not a collection of separate ministries under one roof. With that, you need a unified plan to experience God's design for the church. The body of Christ has to work together as one to be healthy.

This is what the process looks like:



If you plan with a process like this, I believe you will experience the following:

1. You will gain perspective about your current situation—your starting point. As a senior leader, it is easy to forget that not everyone sees ministry from your perspective. You see a lot of what is going on and understand the context in which everything operates. But this can also lead to a lack of perspective and limited clarity because you're only seeing it from one vantage point. There is a great deal of clarity that comes to everyone involved in a formal planning process.

2. You will discover the big picture. The larger your organizations—that is, if you have more than two people—you're going to see the same set of realities differently. The truth of those realities is seeing them within the context of your unique ministry setting. When all the pieces are assembled, you're likely to feel like you're seeing the big picture for the very first time. So much of our work in ministry is isolated to individual work. The role of planning is to understand how everything is or is not working together.

3. You will encourage creativity and innovation as you uncover new ideas. The best ideas come in the midst of collaboration, especially with people who have skin in the game. The people who make up your planning team should be vested in the success of your church. When we rely on one person for creativity and insight, we risk having our ideas become stale, predictable, and out of sync. It also puts an unrealistic burden on that one person.

4. You will clarify your vision. Most leaders understand the significance of vision. But defining and refining that vision is hard work. It's necessary work, but it certainly isn't easy. As your ministry plan is assembled, you'll better understand how well you have identified, articulated, and implemented your ministry plan. It should bring all the individual pieces together to achieve the vision God has given you.

5 You will experience alignment of people and ministries and eliminate the silos. Clarity is definitely a buzzword these days. I think it's important, but what comes after clarity motivates me so much more through this process. Clarity should result in alignment—or often times realignment. Alignment is what verifies you're investing your resources and people effectively. The temptation is to depend on your feelings to bring this level of clarity. That never works. And the larger your church, the less you should rely on your gut for anything but recognizing when it's time for lunch.

6. You will encourage people to be part of something bigger than themselves. When you don't see the big picture, you can start to feel like your contribution doesn't really matter. We don't want anyone on any ministry staff to feel as if their role is insignificant, because that's not true. I find that this process brings a renewed energy to many front-line staff and volunteers who are reminded that what they do fits into a much larger plan for Kingdom impact.

7. You will establish accountability by giving individuals ownership and responsibility.

You can't build a plan without also assigning accountability structures to ensure the plan is being followed or modified appropriately. The truth is, until someone is held accountable for a defined, measurable outcome, that person may or may not achieve a stated objective. This old management saying is true: "What gets measured, gets done." When it's done right, the team holds each other accountable for results—accountability isn't left to just one person.

8. You will focus on what's most important right now. Ministry people are often naturally idea people. That's how God gifted them. But a weakness of idea people is they can spend their time coming up with ideas at the expense of getting things done. That's where good strategic plans are helpful. They define what's most important, prioritize tasks, and achieve milestones along the way. There is a surprising amount of momentum you will gain as you achieve each of the milestones in your ministry plan.

* * *

I can think of nothing—outside of supernatural intervention—that can propel a ministry forward faster than having a ministry plan. When you adopt a theology of planning, you begin to understand that God's vision also comes with the responsibility to work that out through the people and resources he has provided to you.

Having a strategic ministry plan gives you something to lean on when leading in the trenches. It ensures that you stay true to the vision God has given you to accomplish and ensures that you aren't swayed to go a different way—however attractive it may be at the moment.

Operating without a ministry plan will only guarantee one thing: more of the same.

CONCLUSION

In any given situation, someone is the loudest voice in the room. Sometimes the loudest voice is also the wisest voice. Sometimes the loudest voice is the most experienced voice. Sometimes the loudest voice is the most spiritually mature voice. Sometimes the loudest voice is the angriest voice. And sometimes the loudest voice is just that—the loudest voice.

Isn't it interesting how our outlook, our decisions, and our approach to life are shaped by the loudest voice in the room? Of course, depending on the character and heart of the individual, sometimes the loudest voice has the potential to rally people to a greater good. In other situations, the loudest voice has the potential to generate the greatest harm. One unifies. The other creates division. Unfortunately, it's sometimes difficult to distinguish the two, because they're both vocal and...well...loud.

Here are some quick observations about the loudest voices in different relational dynamics:

- When the loudest voice is a critic, it's easy to begin making decisions that compromise God's calling.
- When the loudest voice is our kids, we sometimes sacrifice their future by giving them an inflated view of their place in this world.
- When the loudest voice is someone older and more experienced than us, there's often great wisdom but it may also come with a hesitancy to take new ground.
- When the loudest voice is a friend, sometimes the desire to protect us prevents him or her from delivering the truth we need to hear.
- When the loudest voice is our voice, we can easily find ourselves at a place where we are crippled by pride or fear.

Counsel from others is a good thing. We need to foster relationships where good counsel flows. However, good counsel is typically confirmed through multiple voices. More important, good counsel is never contrary to the voice of God.

That brings me to this final thought: The voice of God never contradicts Scripture. God never tells us to do something that is different from what he's already expressed through his Word. Though I know God uses prayer, promptings, circumstances, other people, etc., to get our attention and to point us in a new direction, he never tells us to move down a path that's contrary to his plan communicated through the Bible. Unfortunately, we all probably know of

examples where someone ended up making poor choices and faced the consequences even after “God told me to do it.”

That, of course, begs this question: Is the voice of God the loudest voice in the room? We need mentors. We need elders. We need critics. We need the conversation. At the end of the day, though, we need God’s wisdom. If we pray for that and discipline our lives to regularly engage his Word, he will give us that.

And when God gives us his wisdom, we should figure out how to act on it.

Every church can benefit from good planning. What that ultimately ends up looking like will be different, so don’t try to just copy someone else’s process. The important thing to remember is that planning is a process. Once you become familiar with the process, you’ll find that it organizes and informs your decision making. This is when you know you have a good plan, one that will help you bring to life the vision God has given you.

Ironically, planning can actually be very exciting.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What initially pops into your head when you hear the word *planning*?
- When have you been a leader without a plan? When have you been a leader with a plan that was never acted upon? And when have you been a leader with a plan that was executed well?
- Why is hope such a terrible strategy to grow, develop, and multiply what God has entrusted to you?
- What is the value of seeking—and receiving—advice from others? When is it easy to do so? When is it more difficult?
- Why is it unhealthy for a church to have a “culture of honor” in which everyone waits on senior leadership to speak or move so no plan is ever implemented?
- Why is not having a plan the same as having a plan? What is your reaction to the words found on the sign in Nothing, Arizona?
- How do you know when your plans align with God’s plans?
- Who are the “wise guys” in your life that have helped you make informed decisions when it came to creating ministry plans? How do you discern who to let into your circle of influence?
- How can you make sure your plans accurately reflect your church and the ministry God has called you to implement within your community?
- Are you spending most of your time on the things that only you can do? If not, what steps do you need to implement so that your plans are aligned with God’s?
- At any given moment or in any situation, someone usually has the loudest voice, so how do you know when to listen and when to tune them out?
- How could your church benefit from better planning? What plans do you need to make today in order to create plans for the future health of your ministry?

ABOUT TONY MORGAN



Tony was the Founder and Lead Strategist of The Unstuck Group. Started in 2009, The Unstuck Group has served over 700 churches throughout the United States and several countries around the world. Previously, Tony served on the senior leadership teams of three rapidly growing churches including NewSpring Church in South Carolina. He has five published books, including *The Unstuck Church*, and, with Amy Anderson, he hosted the The Unstuck Church Podcast which has thousands of listeners each month.

Tony passed away in 2024, leaving behind a legacy of thought leadership, innovation, and a deep commitment to helping churches thrive. He was married to Emily for more than twenty-five years, and they have four kids: Kayla, Jacob, Abby, and Brooke. To learn more about Tony and The Unstuck Group, visit:

🌐 theunstuckgroup.com

📞 844-486-7882

✉️ help@theunstuckgroup.com

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