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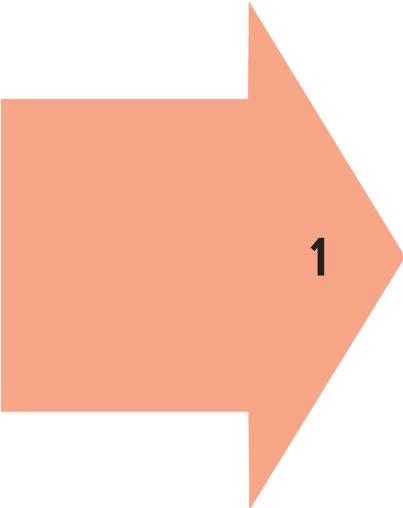
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1

Break Out of the Vicious Trend Cycle—and Lead!

All I could see was the number of parents leaving their children’s spiritual training completely up to us, the local church.

What was God trying to tell me?

Receiving a phone call from a parent can stir up so many different emotions. But this phone call was different. The parent wasn’t calling to “recommend” a change for his child within our ministry. He wasn’t calling with complaints or questions about a volunteer. He was calling because he was confused and filled with sadness over his nineteen-year-old, college-freshman son. Why call the kidmin leader? Because he knew that his child had had a significant turning point toward Christ in his faith journey when he was nine years old. But now, instead of living a life of putting God’s Word into practice, standing unshakeable when the floods and torrents of life struck, his son was making choices that were pushing him toward destruction.

Ring. Sigh. Sadness. Discouragement. How long would this pattern continue?

I (Pat) would like to say that was the only parent phone call I received of its kind, but that would be far from the truth. Instead of dreaming of new horizons our children’s ministry could explore, I

found myself wrestling with God over the stories being told. This wrestling brought many sleepless nights. I found myself in the same state as these parents—confused and filled with grief and sadness over the kids who had made decisions for Christ in our children’s ministry now walking away from their faith as they became older. During this time, I was asking a lot of questions. What did this mean? How could I help our church be more effective at making disciples? Was there anything I could really do to change things in our church? Was I alone?

Kids ministry leaders are gripped profoundly to make sure kids develop to be unshakeable in their faith. We want to make sure their life will never veer off course. We believe those wide-eyed, giggly preschoolers are full of potential! We believe every kid we lock eyes with matters to God, and they matter to us. Children’s ministry leaders like you do the gritty, hard work of maximizing the resources we have been given to make our ministry the best children’s ministry possible. We work hard to develop volunteers as fully functional leaders. We teach the Bible creatively with passion and clarity. Why? Because our desire is to inspire kids toward a transformed relationship with Jesus!

Your kids ministry and mine have shifted from “babysitting” kids to influencing and leading them toward spiritual growth. We find validation in and cheer the Barna Group as they share a statistic from their research that 80 percent of those accepting Jesus as their Savior do so before they turn thirteen. We take every opportunity we have to cast a vision to our volunteers of the importance of building relationships with our kids in a small-group environment so that they can learn how to apply God’s truth to their everyday lives.

Much like you, my cheering turned into groaning when I heard through conferences and researchers like Orange, D6, Lifeway Research, and Christian Smith that a high percentage of college-age students who grew up in a church are walking away from their faith, having decided the church and their faith are not for them at all. It

was at one of these conferences that I also heard George Barna share another staggering statistic from a national tracking survey entitled TweenPoll. This survey revealed that “only one-third of America’s adolescents ardently contend that Jesus Christ returned to physical life after His crucifixion and death on the cross. By their own admission, they are confused theologically and do not know what to think about competing worldviews and belief systems.” How could this be the outcome with the work we are doing? What part do you and I have in these statistics becoming the reality of our kids?

Bitterness was starting to creep into my groaning, which only gave Satan what he wanted. To crush these statistics, I decided to cast a new vision to our volunteers.

CRUSH THE STATISTICS!

I remember the gasps that came out the mouths of our volunteers as I asked ten kids, known to all of us, to walk on the stage, and then had eight of the ten kids actually turn their backs to the volunteers. This stark visual showed us that even with all the great work we were doing, some of these statistics could be a reality at our church. One volunteer yelled out, “Not on my watch it won’t!” which brought the loudest cheer I ever heard from the rest of the volunteers! Some immediately began to get on their knees and pray. It didn’t take long before everyone joined in lamenting before God to protect our kids and open our eyes. There wasn’t a dry eye in the house! I remember opening my eyes as I listened to their prayers. I was moved to tears in thanking God for being a personal God, One who hears every prayer. I left that volunteer gathering knowing God had more for us to learn and face as a ministry.

I found myself searching Scripture to find courage and God’s direction. It was during one of my Bible readings that I sensed God was speaking to me—and now it was time to see if I had the guts to obey. There were three words at the beginning of Deuteronomy 6:4 that

God wouldn't let me move from: "Hear, O Israel." I remember thinking, "Really God, You don't think I can handle more than these three simple words?" But the work that God had to do within me began with just those three words.

Have you ever found yourself only seeing a certain type of car on the road when you find yourself shopping for that particular car? Children's ministry became like this for me; I kept noticing the same thing over and over, every which way I turned. Even though our ministry was doing a dynamite job of helping kids know who God is by knowing His story, and volunteers were engaging kids through relationships, all I could see was the number of parents leaving their children's spiritual training completely up to us, the local church.

I remember the morning I cried with the realization that I, Willow's kidmin leader, put us (the church) in the posture of *owning* the responsibility of impressing God's commands on the hearts of the kids walking through our ministry doors. I remember sitting with my journal and I felt God lovingly tell me again, "Hear, O Israel." This is what I wrote in my journal next. *"I love your kids more than all your volunteers combined. Just as I spoke and moved the larger community of Israel, you must do the same. At times this journey will be difficult, requiring your perseverance, but know I have already put a community around you. It's your time to learn how to influence them."*

I believe many of us find ourselves clinging to the trend-solutions shared at all the big kidmin conferences, hoping that we will find some solution to our massive problem. Why? Because we know for the sake of our kids' spiritual development, something *needs* to change. Matt and I agree! We can "imagine the impact when church and family collide," as Reggie Joiner of Orange puts it.

All I could see was the number of parents leaving their children's spiritual training completely up to us, the local church.

WE'RE DOING EVERYTHING RIGHT, BUT . . .

I (Pat) wanted to change the landscape of our ministry so that the stories of kids walking away from their faith after they left their homes and entered adult life were at a minimum, not a maximum. So, I did what many of us in the kidmin community do—I believed if I just implemented one of these out-of-the-box solutions to the walking-away problem, our ministry would be magically transformed. We would have parents begging us to be involved with what their children were learning and experiencing. I remember walking out of a macro-trend conference thinking that a particular solution presented was the game changer I had been searching for!

Here's the deal, I had an immediate need; the conference was *the* event that opened my eyes to see a significant shift was needed. So what did I do? I rallied my team together to wordsmith. We redrafted our mission statement, values, and purpose to align with this shift. Then we deployed them into action. Sound familiar?

Weeks turned into months, but the stories remained the same. How could this be? Our kid ministry added the programs I learned in the conferences showing a new way of ministry, a new trend-solution. Our strategies had all the right language but not much changed. What gives?

The problem was I believed *it* (the trend-solution) was the game changer. But God was looking to *me* to be the game changer. God was asking me to lead kidmin differently. *Hear, O Israel . . .* But how was I going to break away from this vicious cycle of getting caught up in out-of-the-box trend-solutions?

Effective kidmin leaders do the difficult work of understanding the deeper conversations behind the trend before rushing to implement the suggested trend-solution into the local church. Unfortunately, far too many kidmin leaders (myself included!) have been tempted to embrace the latest trend and neglect larger and deeper discussions.

Without seriously considering the impact on our ministry and receptivity of leadership to implementing the next given trend-solution, we are essentially setting the playlist on repeat . . . we will be here again soon.

We can break out of this seemingly endless cycle. But it will take a vulnerable level of honesty and listening, a deeper level of dialogue, and a different posture of leadership to change the game.

WHAT HAPPENED TO MY STATION WAGON?

We can learn a lot about the positive and negative impacts of trends just by watching what's happening in the marketplace. I (Matt) have vivid memories of growing up in the early 1980s and riding in the back of my parents' grand station wagon . . . facing backwards. Oh yeah, if your parents had one of these too, you know just how awesome this really was. It was like a whole different universe way back there in the rear-facing third seat. And since my brothers didn't want to ride facing backward, I was master of my own little universe.

Now if you were born in the mid-'80s or after you may not realize the immensity of these bad boys. These cars were *HUGE*. These vehicles were so massive they gave them extra-long names like "*Chevrolet Caprice Classic Station Wagon*" or "*Ford Country Squire XL Station Wagon*." Seriously? Someone in the marketing department fell asleep. Why not "*Behemoth*" or "*The Ultimate Grocery Getter*"? I guess they left the nicknaming up to third graders like you and me.

It was a very sad day when I got off the school bus, sometime around 1984, and ole Grocery Getter was gone. Nada. Zip. No longer in the driveway. Chrysler had done a very, very bad thing. What was this new maroon vehicle with the faux-wooden panels running down the side? Was it a full-size van that had been zapped by a shrink ray? Was it a K-Car with an abnormally tall roof and a hatchback? Nope, it was the beginning of a new revolution in the auto industry called the *minivan*.

A new macro-trend was born.

Enter: minivan, stage right.

Exit: station wagon with large rear-facing seat, stage left.

Crushed: my transportation fantasy world.

It's not difficult to think back over the past few years and consider how other marketplace (and local church!) trends have shaped the way we live our lives in the Western world. We now watch movies on small, handheld, portable devices, @tweeting our #FavoriteLine from the #Movie while locating on Urbanspoon where we are going to meet for dinner, Periscoping our dessert for seventy-three creepy, mostly unknown viewers, tracking our steps home on our Fitbit, then posting our final step-count on Instagram.

That sentence would not have made sense seven years ago, but somehow that all makes sense to us now. We are all “early adopters” now. But if we are not careful as kidmin leaders, we can adopt new trend-solutions before we have had the opportunity to talk candidly about what will be most effective for our local church context.

BUILDING A GRANDER VISION

Because of these challenges we all face in children's ministry, we are so desperate for a solution that we tend to fall back into a “coordinator” mindset, and we move too quickly into solution mode and invest too little time understanding and driving real, transformational, or systemic change. But actually solving the plethora of challenges we face takes a whole lot of creative grit. Because, as we've seen, what our churches really need are leaders willing to pay the price to help bring about authentic and systemic change.

God began to show me (Pat) that I needed to be a bit scrappy and do the hard work of taking great thoughts and strategies (like the suggested trend-solutions of family ministry, equipping parents, faith

at home, and many others) and become the game changer or change agent needed in my local church! (We will unpack what this process looks like chapter by chapter as we continue through the book.) God was challenging me to let go of being the coordinator of “what is” (programs and out-of-the-box solutions) to becoming the leader and influencer who can align to a *grander vision* for our church to maximize our churchwide impact. His desire was for me to influence other ministry partners and open the eyes of church leadership if we were going to get radically different results.

Is God telling you the same?

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEFINING SUCCESS

This revelation helped me selectively abandon what wasn’t working. Let me give you an example. After leaving a trend-solution conference, we came home and began creating “FX”: *A Family Experience*. “FX” was a monthly gathering that immediately followed our weekend services in which kids sat with their parents to creatively learn biblical truths through worship, drama, and games. This event was well attended and totally fun! From the outside looking in, you would have thought that “FX” was a huge success!

Sounds like we should keep this, right? Surprisingly, no. The vision was great and families continued to attend, but it was a strategy owned *only* by our children’s ministry, not our church leadership. Therefore, it didn’t totally align with the overall strategy of our weekend church calendar.

Personally, I loved creating “FX”! I didn’t want to stop “FX,” but I knew if I didn’t manage my fear and courageously end its existence, I would continue being a coordinator of my strategy to address the trend instead of being God’s game changer to bring about real change on a larger scale. Here’s what I learned: *Before you implement a trend-solution, know what it is that will make that solution a winning strategy.*

Where I went wrong was, I didn't spend enough time defining what success was in my local church context before we went right into implementation mode. My first step should have been to pull the volunteers that I would consider core to our ministry and ask them how we would know if the trend-solution we wanted to implement was successful for us. If I had conducted deeper dialogue, not just with my kidmin team, but with other key partners within our church (our junior high pastor, high school pastor, and so on), discussing questions like "What do I really want out of this?" and "What will be key indicators of success?", it would have helped me identify possible gaps up front. It also would have engaged other strategic partners in the church to join this trend-solution into making it a reality that lasts.

It was very difficult to let "FX" die. But it was a necessary ending if we were going to head true north toward *our entire church* owning the vision of doing whatever it takes to crush the statistics and transform the hearts of our parents and kids to become champions of faith.

THINK ABOUT IT

WHEN IT COMES TO problem solving in leadership, where do you see yourself? Are you more of a coordinator who regularly finds yourself in a reactive mode based on the needs of the church calendar? Do you find yourself looking for the perfect game-changer trend or the out-of-the-box solutions? Or are you coming to realize that you must develop the skills to become the game changer to influence and drive more strategic and systemic change? No matter which group you most closely identify with, you are a part of the kidmin leadership struggle!

Most of us are in kids ministry because we are focused on the long-term vision of what we are trying to accomplish in the lives of children twenty years from now. What will their little lives look like when they are in college, as they start a family, as they make big life decisions? Will living for our great God be the central organizing principle of their lives?

What's unique about this book is, it is a resource you can use every year to rethink the way you do ministry so you accomplish your long-term vision. This book can become your personal tool for change, or it can be a tool used with your team to spur on conversations to help you manage the present and create a future together.

You *can* break the vicious cycle of running from one trend-solution to the next. In this chapter, we started by confessing that we've all done it. In the introduction, we declared that these trend-solutions alone would not solve our problem; rather, we need a new posture of kidmin leadership. In the chapters ahead we will walk through a more systematic way of leading within kidmin that will address the problems we face on a deeper, more authentic level—leadership that can bring about the church-wide impact you are looking for. It's hard work. It takes grit, determination, humility, and honesty. Let's do this together.