



No more long-term planning. Instead of forecasting and managing the future, the opportunity leader recognizes that God brings opportunities our way and He only expects us to respond effectively when they come. Yes, it's scary. But you'll also see mind-blowing results because you're in tune with what God actually wants.

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A New Model for Ministry Leadership

As a Christian university president, I never *planned* to:

- start an NCAA football program from scratch
- launch a school of nursing as a result of our “old main” building falling down
- develop the world’s premier Christian University for the Arts
- build a network of branch campuses across the South, and then close most of them years later
- create the largest online Christian university MBA program in China
- develop a campus community that is a beacon for racial reconciliation in the Deep South

The most critical turning points and breakthroughs of ministry are rarely planned. I can prove that to you if you hang in there with me for the first few pages of this book.

In 2002, I purposely began to let go of the iron grip all leaders have on planning as the foundation of focus and energy. It was a struggle that took over a decade until, as a university, we were entirely driven by *capturing opportunities* rather than *building plans*.

Paradoxically, relinquishing planning is the single best thing I've ever done in my professional ministry life—and also the scariest. It was complex to accomplish but also simple. And, even though it took a long time to implement, it changed everything overnight.

My evolution away from dependency on traditional planning was worth it all. This shift opened up growth, reach, and ministry that would never have been imaginable if I had stayed welded to

conventional planning. And, as a bonus, it has brought a personal joy and freedom in leadership that I never thought possible.

Opportunity Leadership—the model of leadership that I've developed as I've shifted focus away from traditional planning—is almost bewildering to those who have never experienced it. I'm often asked questions like:

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- How is it possible to provide leadership without a plan for the future?
- How do you gain buy-in from stakeholders without a planning structure?
- How do you get agreement on where you are headed, measure your effectiveness, or even know what's next without a plan?

I've learned that the only way to convince skeptics of Opportunity Leadership is to show them the results.

COVID-19 is the most straightforward example of why traditional planning is ineffective. Did your ministry plan for it? Did anyone? Of course not! But we all dealt with it, made adjustments rapidly, and even found ways to significantly improve our “normal ministry”—even though a simultaneous worldwide pandemic was

not included in the five-year plan of a single ministry leader.

When the virus hit, every long-range organizational plan was tossed in the trash, and we all became stronger leaders because we couldn't depend on a pre-determined plan to cope with this challenge. Instead, this "opportunity of crisis" required us to provide leadership through it. And most importantly, we all became more dependent on God for the future rather than leaning on our carefully crafted plans.

For ministries, the jarring and speedy adjustments we made during COVID-19 were a forced push to step into the core of Opportunity Leadership. It's a model of leadership that begins and ends with complete trust in God for a ministry's direction. It allows future destinations to be ordered by His hand and loosens our iron grip on the wheel of control. When we embrace it, we join those leaders who have become free from the overwhelming burden of determining what is best for their ministry. We no longer need to manipulate our efforts and circumstances to engineer outcomes that force pre-determined destinations to be reached.

Opportunity Leadership is grounded in waiting in anticipation for God-given opportunities to develop that mesh seamlessly with our mission, gifting, and capacity—propelling us to destinations that are heavenly ordained. As a result, we become leaders who hone traits that enable us to become highly sensitive to the wind of God and create an organizational culture that allows us to respond to new opportunities with urgency, adeptness, and energy.

Proof That Opportunity Leadership Works

If you've been schooled in the practices of leadership, I know you're already skeptical that leading without a plan is possible. Let me start by addressing any initial doubts you have about my challenge to discard planning. After that, I'll demonstrate why Opportunity Leadership is a superior path.

Following the organizational patterns developed by the corporate community, most ministry leaders are so deeply embedded in traditional planning structures that these ideas may appear on the page like a foreign language. But I assure you, even leaders in the most bureaucratic structures can implement at least small portions of this model—and the slightest movement toward Opportunity Leadership will be uplifting for you and your ministry.

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I'd never before seen leadership unbuckled from planning and had to find my way in the dark. You won't have to because you'll get the benefit of learning from my experience. I'll outline the why, who, and how of implementing the model based on my years of developing Opportunity Leadership by trial and error. You'll be encouraged that making the shifts necessary to embrace the entirety of the Opportunity Leadership model requires a slow, gradual, and purposeful change and

is not best accomplished with dramatic acceleration or sharp turns. And to help you chart your path, I'll share the war stories—good and bad—for how Opportunity Leadership gets lived out because this is an in-the-trenches practical model for leaders like you.

One caution, though. Don't worry about getting a clear answer to the end-point question of how you're going to do this in your current leadership role—that's planning. Instead, just start by capturing the opportunities for change that are easily grasped in the low-hanging fruit of the model, and then let the rest work itself out with time—that's Opportunity Leadership.

Now, let's look at the proof that this leadership model really works.

In our early years of living by the Opportunity Leadership

principles as a university, I was stopped cold after writing a grant request to a foundation. The application asked for a summary of the significant accomplishments of the previous five years. Not thinking much about it, I quickly jotted down those advances that stood out in my memory. But when I saw all that God had done written down on a single piece of paper, I was overwhelmed.

I knew right then that I had to devise a creative way to share with my board of trustees the same astonishment and celebrate God's blessings. Here's how it happened.

As a university, we don't do planning—we capture opportunities. For years the board had been 100 percent supportive of Opportunity Leadership, so looks of confusion shrouded the room when I laid before them what appeared to be a five-year aggressive comprehensive plan for the university.

In the style of a traditional planning leadership model, the document focused on five significant overarching goals, along with a list of seventy-two implementation targets. At most universities, a board would look at the paper with excitement to see what might be ahead and prepare to work with the president to launch an eighteen-month-long series of discussions across the campus to refine the goals and objectives list and gain input and buy-in from all sectors of stakeholders.

But my board studied the document before them with puzzlement. They knew I didn't believe in what I identify as "destination planning" and that, as a university, we had purposefully made the shift completely away from the long-range planning model that has become a fortress for nearly all leaders. As a board, we had talked repeatedly over the previous years about our commitment to stop projecting God's destinations, but instead build a faith, philosophy, and team

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that is sensitive to the wind of God and moves quickly to capture opportunities when it blows. Our remarkable success in the preceding years was a result of Opportunity Leadership. It was the hallmark on which we had built our future as a university.

Despite their questioning looks, I pressed on with my presentation, beginning to read aloud the goals of the five-year plan, even though I could almost hear the board members' silent reactions of alarm in response to the bold benchmarks.

Belhaven University Five-Year Goals

1. Increase enrollment 43 percent

Impossible! This would make us one of the fastest-growing universities in the country.

2. Raise \$21 million

Crazy!!! This is way too much money for us to raise that fast. Let's do a feasibility study.

3. Construct \$32 million of new buildings and renovations

Now, this is getting out of hand. Our job as a board is to slow this president WAY down.

4. Add seven undergraduate academic majors, including nursing, computer science, film, and social work

Nursing in itself is huge. How about two or maybe three majors, and then see how we are doing?

5. Add eight graduate degrees, including dance, education, and leadership

Let's skinny this up, so we don't frustrate the faculty with failure because we took on too much.

As I read the first couple of goals, the look of disorientation

turned to distress and anxiety. As I got through the third goal, I began to see smiles on the faces of some of the longest-serving board members who figured out where I was going. And, by the time I'd finished announcing the fifth goal, all except the newest members realized what was happening.

The presentation was not a *projection* of the next five years. Instead, what I gave the board was a summary of what had been accomplished during the *previous* five years—a time during which we operated without a plan and focused on capturing opportunities.

Opportunity Leadership had changed everything for our university. If we had stayed cemented to traditional planning, and I had brought the same goals to our board five years previously (before they actually happened), their reaction would have been predictable:

1. The board would have questioned my ability as a leader because the plan was far too ambitious. Bluntly, they would have thought I was foolish or naive to recommend goals this bold.
2. The board would have cut the five-year goals in about half—and at best, our results would have been about half of what we actually achieved over those five years.

Plus, we would never have been amazed by what only God could do because we would have limited the plan to what we knew we could accomplish. And, we certainly wouldn't have gone on to add “with God's help” into the university's brochure.

This hard-results demonstration cemented our commitment to abandoning traditional planning and moving ahead with a confidence that God will bring us opportunities—although we have no idea what they might be. And since the time of this five-year validation, I've learned that surprises at this level were only the beginning of opportunities that the Lord would bring our way when we fully committed to Opportunity Leadership.

So gather your courage, set aside assumed leadership absolutes, cut up the box, and let's walk together to start capturing change rather than creating it. This book is the story of Opportunity Leadership lived out and it will help you do just that. It is not an idealized theoretical model of leadership, but a proven fresh approach to leadership that will free you from the confinement of traditional planning and bring you the joy of leading by catching the wind of God and trusting Him for both the opportunities and outcomes.

It is time for more Christian leaders to stop planning and start getting results!

Are You Simply Going Through the Motions?

On a Monday morning, I called the assistant of another university president. I wanted to set up a few minutes to talk about a potential partnership that would allow us both to reach a significant pool of new students and provide a substantial new source of income. After some explanation to assure I was not selling something and was a colleague in the presidency, I was told that there might be a gap in the president's schedule to chat in about two weeks.

Emphasizing that this opportunity had urgency, I asked if I could speak with the president for only twenty minutes sometime in the next two days. I simply wanted to get the discussion started. "His schedule is packed with meetings because we are working on a master plan," was the reply. But I was told he might be able to squeeze in a brief time late on Friday afternoon.

I hung up and called a different university whose president took my call without an appointment. This president was responsive to the opportunity of partnership and overjoyed to reach the additional students, plus make good use of the new revenue projected to be over \$1 million annually.

My experience with the first president's assistant helps illustrate how the traditional planning process is totally consuming, and too often becomes an end in itself. It keeps leaders extremely busy and brings few meaningful results. Leading a ministry through the well-worn path of planning has:

- key team members packing too many tedious meetings into every day
- administrators collecting far too much tangential data
- CEOs attempting to cajole buy-in from the most fearful people controlling the edges of a stake-holding community with an iron grip because of a lack of trust

And, if success is measured by “getting it past the committee” instead of the inspiration of a new direction, there is something wrong with both the ethos and edifice of a planning model.

MANY LEADERS ARE PRIVATELY FRUSTRATED WITH THE INEFFICIENCY OF GRINDING AWAY IN A PLANNING PROCESS. STILL, THEY CLING TO IT WITH TENACITY BECAUSE NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE GUARANTEES RECOGNITION OF THEIR “VALUE-ADDED” AS THE LEADER.

Although appearing diligent, and I'm sure well-intentioned, many leaders are only going through the motions of leadership because the results are typically inadequate. They are reduced to the lowest common denominators of agreement, security, and manageability, and overlaid with an idealized vision of the future. These leaders are privately frustrated with the inefficiency of grinding away in a planning process. Still, they cling to it with tenacity because no other alternative (other than extraordinary fundraising) guarantees recognition of their “value-added” as the leader. So, they

retain a broken model for fear that they would appear to be abandoning their leadership role if they eliminated it.

As a result, they fill their days with a schedule that doesn't produce deliverable results but still feel justified in their role by the constant activity that keeps them harried. And too often, they are pushing forward the weighty structure of planning, even when they know, deep down, that it probably won't make much of a difference.

Why We Allow Empty Planning to Fill Our Time

Maybe you can relate to the leaders I just described. You are diligent and want to make a difference in your ministry, but sometimes you feel like you're going through the motions. So why do leaders continue to follow the traditional model of planning? There are many intertwined reasons why we so dutifully follow it—and, as a result, segregate our dependence on God to a prayer at the beginning of the planning meeting, a blessing over our plan when the work is completed, and an impassioned lament when the plan doesn't work. I would suggest ten factors that are pushing us to cling to superfluous formal planning structures.

1. We Embrace Planning to Please Board Members

At its most practical level, ministry leaders embrace complex planning to resonate with board members' everyday corporate culture. Structured strategic planning fits the board's expectations of what a leader should do because it mirrors their world's best practices. The board members are the ones who "own" the ministry—but because they cannot be involved in the depth of a leader's work, formalized planning provides a tangible way for them to stamp control on the organization.

2. We Assume Planning Equals Leadership

As Christian leaders, we have been indoctrinated with the assumption that planning equals leadership. Of course, we have a responsibility to be out in front of wherever the ministry is going. But I would argue that our vital role is in facilitating excellence in the execution of the direction we already know we're headed, rather than trying to predict destinations of the future.

If we were all judged on our ability to plan a future, most of us would be considered miserable failures if we were to judge by how far off-mark our idealized plan misses the target. So why would we want to continue to make future planning our centerpiece?

3. We Are Expected to Distinctly Hear from God

As spiritual leaders, there is an assumption that God will uniquely speak to us in ways that make clear the ministry's direction. Because of that, many ministries are waiting in whispered expectation for their leader to demonstrate unique spiritual insight at a level that empowers them to see around corners predicting the future with pinpoint accuracy. And in some theological traditions, this characteristic is openly measured in valuing ministry leadership.

Of course, spiritual discernment needs to be in a leader's gifting, and spiritual leadership must be an evident hallmark of our work. Although most often, we need to demonstrate our spiritual acumen through our relationships rather than by unveiling plans.

4. We Believe Leaders Are the Keepers of Order, Structure, Equity, and Process

We often feel our leadership is hitting on all cylinders when plans (and people) fit into orderly building blocks of progress that can be arranged in equal parts. But moving a ministry forward involves considering intertwined complex issues that often won't neatly align. There

are personnel strengths and weaknesses, resource priorities and projections, bias or blind spots, competing priorities, and more. Those are not decisions best made in a diverse group setting when the agenda is most often controlled by whoever speaks first or most forcefully.

Helpful solutions are rarely found in orderly planning that ignites territorialism by bringing each attendee to the table advocating for their unique constituency group. Such settings are doomed to mediocrity because meaningful change may only be discussed in carefully nuanced tones for fear of misinterpretation.

5. We Have Bought Into the False Dichotomy of Leadership Versus Administration

I don't know how many times I've heard the misguided declaration, "I'm a leader, not an administrator." Does this mean there is something nobler about leadership than administration? Does this mean only the smartest can lead while the others can only administrate? When boiled down, the most effective ministry CEOs probably spend, at most, about 10 percent of their time engaged in moments of "pure leadership," and all the rest of their work is administration. One is not better than the other—both are vitally important in leadership.

Leadership without administrative execution is hollow. In the critical tipping point moments of leadership decisions (about a dozen decisions will make or break the year for most CEOs), you will not have the wisdom to lead unless you've already gained the insight only available by in-the-weeds administration. Leadership is not about punching the "leadership clock" versus the "administration clock." It is about being ready when the clock strikes.

LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT PUNCHING THE "LEADERSHIP CLOCK" VERSUS THE "ADMINISTRATION CLOCK." IT IS ABOUT BEING READY WHEN THE CLOCK STRIKES.

6. We Assume Buy-In Requires Including All Stakeholders in the Planning Process

We wrongly suppose the only way to get ministry-wide buy-in is to include all key stakeholders in a planning process. But if having a seat at the planning table is the only way to get a voice in an organization, significant inward examination needs to precede any outward look through a planning lens. A culture of transparency of information, accessibility to those in authority, and a purposeful nonhierarchical culture all create an atmosphere where ideas can be shared and explored, ownership created, and insights gained from everyone across the spectrum of the ministry.

7. We Have Been Programmed to Accept That “Planning Takes Time”

“Planning takes time” is another defective leaning-post of leaders. Some of the most direction-setting decisions I’ve been involved with have happened within weeks of the original idea being proposed. I’ve also walked through substantial changes from consideration to implementation within just hours because opportunity afforded a window of response that would have been missed by delaying.

When the right organizational environment is created, planning structures and meetings no longer need to be the dominant activity of leaders. Instead, enriching the culture and empowering people becomes a leader’s priority.

8. We Conclude That Planning Is the Only Way to Visibly Lead

Vacuums do become filled, so some leaders live under the erroneous assumption that they will lose their platform to lead if they are not visibly controlling. Opportunity Leadership is not suggesting that planning be abolished altogether. Instead, it seeks a different source for the plans.

Rather than committees, conference tables, and whiteboards,

planning revolves around a constant interaction with both the significant issues and the minutia, out of which new insights, solutions, and opportunities will be revealed and captured. These may come from us as the CEOs, but probably not.

As leaders, we're responsible for helping to sort out good ideas from bad ones, prioritizing time and energy, and using our muscle of position to push past the objections, fears, silos, and possessiveness. And then, we set a high standard for implementation.

9. We Assume Measuring Results Should Drive Our Planning

There is a school of leadership demanding that everything we do organizationally must be measured, and thus, planning is built around our ability to audit outcomes. There are two problems with this approach. First, we rarely do it. We promise our donors the moon, but never return and report why most of our moon-shots didn't even come close. Second, we are only playing around the edges of the most meaningful aspects of ministry when measurement becomes our guiding priority.

It is time to put away props of leadership and not be wooed by the immediacy of appearing productive by PowerPoints jammed with endless data or multi-year projection graphs. Instead, our standard for how we measure success as Christian leadership needs to reflect the desires of God, built on spiritual values that endure. Or to say it even more bluntly, consider the rebuke of God to His people in Amos 5:21–24 as expressed in The Message translation:

I can't stand your religious meetings.

I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.

I want nothing to do with your religion projects,
your pretentious slogans and goals.

I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes,
your public relations and image making.

I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.

When was the last time you sang to *me*?

Do you know what I want?

I want justice—oceans of it.

I want fairness—rivers of it.

That's what I want. That's *all* I want.

When I look back on my years of leading Belhaven University, I count success by watching students whose lives were dramatically

transformed as they captured God's best for their future, and faculty who have deeply invested in developing insightful worldview thinking and Christ-like mentoring and grace. I also see chapel services during which the Lord spoke to us all in deepening ways, athletic teams and residence halls living that purposely built character, and God-centered racial reconciliation lived out every day in every interaction. Those successes don't show in graphs or charts, but they are how God looks at the value of our university.

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10. We Believe Failure Comes from Failing to Plan

We accept the long-quoted consultant's refrain, "Those who fail to plan, plan to fail." I completely disagree. The more reliant we are on planning for our guidance, the less dependent we are on the fountain-head of wisdom. Stepping back from the busyness of planning requires an enormous dependence on God—not just prayer for the blessing of our decisions or rescue from the current crisis. We must become

utterly dependent on the Lord for our entire future, both personally and professionally.

That is a scary step for many Christian leaders, so we cling to the few Scriptures demonstrating detailed planning, such as Jesus instructing His disciples to prepare the Last Supper or Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Yet, at the same time, we are quick to overlook how often God gave the *biggest* ideas to His people in dreams—from Joseph, Jacob, and Abraham, to the wise men seeking Christ, or John on the Isle of Patmos. As Christian leaders, we need to spend more time listening, dreaming, and praying to find God’s destinations for our ministry future, rather than laboring at whiteboards attempting to draw out schematics of God’s best for us.

Breaking Free from the Magnetic Pull of Planning

Your calling and responsibility are too important for your days to be swallowed up in going through the motions of leadership. Unless we purposefully detach, the irresistible magnetic force of planning will control our productivity, priorities, and prestige.

Take a hard and honest look back at your calendar. Last year, how much time did you invest in planning that genuinely moved the needle? Seriously—count up the days, trips, meetings, reading, writing, and worry.

Unfortunately, the blunt answer won’t be encouraging because I’ve seen this consumption-by-planning pattern in hundreds of ministries, with most producing lots of lofty promises but underwhelming results. We must get past our dependency on traditional planning structures to break free to find the future God has in store for us.

The day that we, as leaders, stop worrying about justifying our positions, expertise, value-added, or salary because of our role in destination planning is when God will bring opportunities that open doors to a future we never dreamed possible.

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