

Operational Leadership

If visionaries see pictures and strategists see puzzles, operators see deadlines. Often bored with the planning process, they would rather just get it done. Operational leaders quickly convert plans into step by step actions with assignments, deadlines, and accountabilities that can be implemented and managed. They are action oriented, front line kind of people. They thrive on activity. They love perfecting processes. They often like to maintain the organization. It's all about executing the plan. Operational leaders are the ones who can mobilize a team and take that hill. They know how to operationalize plans.

- Key Question Addressed: How are we going to do it?
- Characteristic: Get things done.
- Style: Once they get the plan from the strategists on leadership team, operational leaders know how to assemble people and resources and execute. They clearly see the steps that need to be taken to achieve the objective.
- Strength: Action oriented, go to leader.
- Potential Weakness: To be so absorbed with achieving the plan that they bulldoze people and don't make enough adjustments along the way.
- Risk: To accomplish the plan by wearing everyone out.
- Opportunity: Regularly ask for feedback and make changes to the plan accordingly. Treat people like people, not machines.

Reflection

What are some of the things an operational leader might say?

Application

Three kinds of leadership are absolutely essential to succeed in men's ministry. When you put together your leadership team, have each member read this article and rate themselves in Figure 1. Make sure you have each type of leadership adequately covered. If not, you're not done recruiting. To succeed you are going to need all three kinds of leadership: *visionary*, *strategic*, and *operational*. Without all three, it's unlikely you will be able to sustain a men's discipleship ministry in your church.

¹ A. N. W. Saunders, translator, *Greek Political Oratory*, (New York, Penguin Books, 1970).

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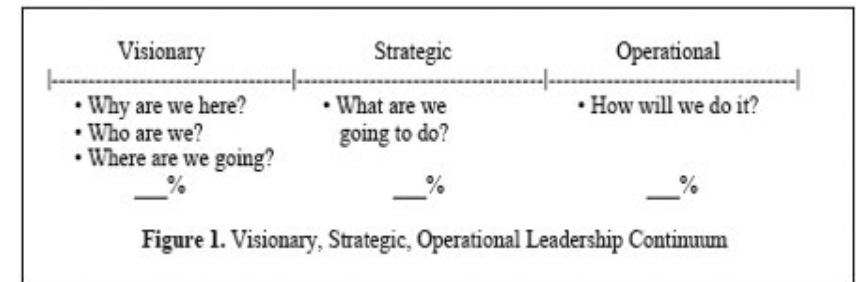
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Visionary, Strategic, and Operational Leadership

Pat Morley

Everything boils down to leadership. To successfully implement an all-inclusive men's discipleship ministry (or for that matter any worthwhile idea) requires three kinds of leadership: *visionary*, *strategic*, and *operational*. Without the right kind of leadership at the right time, it's unlikely you will be able to sustain a men's discipleship ministry in your church.

Most leaders will be a little of each, but usually one tendency dominates. And just as a chameleon changes colors, every leader adapts to the situation at hand based upon where they find themselves on the continuum in Figure 1. Still, as a leader you will have a primary or default mode to which you naturally migrate. Once you know your basic tendency, you can save a lot of time and heartache by not trying to be somebody you're not. You also will know the other kinds of leadership you need to recruit.



For example, you may be almost a pure idea person. If you tend to see things that do not yet exist you are probably a visionary leader. You understand why men's discipleship is so crucial, and you have a vision to do something about it.

Or you may be someone who knows how to conquer Rome. If you see "the next steps" clearly you may be more inclined as a strategic leader. You are the leader that can build the ministry plan.

Maybe you are the "go to" person who specializes in getting things done. If your first disposition is to map out the necessary actions steps you are probably an operational leader. Once someone has drawn up the plan, you are the one who can get it done.

You could also be a combination, like *visionary-strategic* or *strategic-operational*. You may even be visionary-operational, but would probably drive your leadership team crazy—like an entrepreneur with big ideas who then micromanages his people.

Once you know your own natural disposition you can focus on optimizing your

strengths. For starters, if you are a visionary leader, you don't have to feel guilty about being a dreamer, or for not caring that the grammar is correct in the men's ministry manual. With this knowledge of yourself, you can recruit other leaders to compliment your strengths and fill in any gaps.

If you are a strategic leader you can feel good about attaching yourself to a visionary leader and, together, make the dream for men's ministry come true. You need each other. If you are an operational leader, you can stop beating yourself up that you can't develop brilliant plans. Instead, you can be confident and content that you are the front line leader who can turn that plan into powerful momentum events and robust small groups, service projects, and mission trips. You need each other.

Personally, I am something like 80% visionary, 15% strategic, and 5% operational. Fortunately, I have had the good fortune to work with remarkably capable strategic and operational leaders.

Reflection

What kind of leader are you? When you read the questions in Figure 1, which ones are you most naturally able to answer?

What is your best guess about your percentage for each of the three types of leadership? Jot down your answers on the blank lines in Figure 1.

To get our work done, we are going to need vision, strategy, and operations; so let's expand on these three styles of leadership.

Visionary Leadership

In the fourth century BC, Philip of Macedonia was gathering northern Greek cities under his control. Down in Athens the two greatest political orators of the day, Isocrates and Demosthenes, were speaking out. Isocrates was a teacher keen to make sure he presented the facts well. Demosthenes was not so interested in what was "true," but in what could be "made true" by the actions he advocated.¹

They both addressed the threat Philip presented. The story goes that when Isocrates finished, people said "How well he speaks!" But when Demosthenes spoke they said, "Let's march against Philip!"

Reflection

In your own words, what was the difference between Isocrates and Demosthenes?

Visionaries are, well, visual. Visionary leaders live in the world of ideas, dreams, and possibilities. They do not see the world so much as it is as how it could be. Their vision propels them into action. Their unbending resolve catches our attention. They are on a mission. They lift our thoughts from the ruts of routine, ordinary thinking. They help us see what they see. Through them we catch a glimpse of ideas much larger than ourselves. The clarity of their vision captures our imagination, releasing energy and creativity.

- Key Questions Addressed: Who are we, why are we here, where are we going?
- Characteristic: Attract followers.
- Style: See the idea first, undeterred by the obstacles to implementation.

- Strength: See things that do not yet exist.
- Potential Weakness: To plant both feet firmly in thin air.
- Risks: To only see the opportunity, failure to see obstacles clearly.
- Opportunity: Surround self with and listen to strategic and operational leaders.
- Things a visionary leader might say:
 - We want to engage every man in our community with a credible offer of Christ and the resources to grow.
 - The fate of the world depends on the success of this vision.
 - When we set this goal we are literally writing history in advance.
 - It's about giving our lives to a purpose greater than self.
 - Enter prayerfully. The fate of the world is being decided here.

Visionary leaders are often unencumbered by the ability to see the myriad obstacles to success that the strategist will see so clearly. Therefore, every men's ministry also needs leaders of the strategic kind.

Strategic Leadership

If visionaries see pictures, strategists see puzzles. Once they lock on to the idea, they see the whole process of implementation and the myriad details that are involved. They make plans like popcorn machines make popcorn. Strategists have an eye for detail. They clearly see what must be accomplished if the idea is to succeed. They will raise the un-thought-of question, but also find a way when there seems to be no way. They help us plan the mission. The strategist gives us the river banks—our direction. With riverbanks to channel our labor, we gain velocity and momentum.

- Key Question Addressed: What are we going to do?
- Characteristic: Clearly see what needs to be done.
- Style: See the obstacles as the idea is shared, knows almost immediately if there is a deal killer lurking in the shadow of the idea.
- Strength: See clearly what's involved to get to the end point.
- Potential Weakness: To be so distracted by the hurdles that they douse the enthusiasm of others for the vision.
- Risk: To only see the problem, turned off to an idea that has merit because they can immediately see all the obstacles.
- Opportunity: Verbally restate the vision at the beginning of every meeting. This will help enthusiasm. Also, don't dump all the obstacles on the table at once. Spread them out.