LEADERSHIP as RELATIONSHIP II: Finding Meaning, Significance, Community, Direction and Excitement
David S Penner, PhD, Director of the doctoral leadership program, Loma Linda University (dpenner@llu.edu)

In the first part of Leadership as Relationship, we compared what followers’ want and leaders do. We discovered that there are many points on which followers and leaders agree. The common ground falls into five interesting categories – meaning, significance, community, direction and excitement. Remembering that leadership is relationship, it makes sense to begin our work in these areas of agreement.

The question now is how do we go about creating an environment in which this becomes a reality. Where do we start? Most organisations, from congregations to multinational organisations, make some formal attempts to create meaning, significance, community, direction and excitement. What do we already have in place? Although there are far more, let’s examine a cluster of four opportunities: mission, vision and values; strategic planning; hiring and evaluations; and social gatherings. This is not news; there are no headlines in this list. In fact, they are the standard list used by administrators and managers everywhere. They may be a tired and worn-out quartet but what would they look like if re-energized?

The secret to rejuvenation is in reframing the task. By looking at the task in a new way, by giving it a new purpose or by turning it upside down, leaders see new relationships and opportunities. How can we take the administrative tasks and routine touchpoints inherent in our leadership positions and create exciting and imaginative ways to respond to the very things followers want? How can we reframe these tasks so that we can create meaning, significance, and purpose?

Mission, vision, values. Although their power may have in the past disappointed us, the very purpose of this trio is to create shared meaning. How can they be rejuvenated? What if the goal was to create a sense of mission rather than write a formal mission statement? What would happen if the emphasis shifted from preparing ‘statements’ to engaging everyone in creating an active on-going narrative? What if we shifted the focus to collecting stories instead of printing a paragraph? Stories would keep the mission current with retelling. “Our organisation is like...” Everyone could add new stories to the developing narrative.

Likewise, vision statements, rather than statements of goals evaluated once a year, would be replaced by a set of questions that guide decision-making throughout the year. The operational question becomes, how will we want to do this tomorrow? Each task becomes an opportunity to practice the future now.

Strategic planning. The purpose of planning, and particularly strategic planning, is to set direction. When done imaginatively it
The Bible makes gratitude an important part of Christian life. Paul admonished the Christians in Colossae not only to be thankful to God (Colossians 3:17), but to live with an attitude of thankfulness: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.” (Colossians 3:15).

Thankfulness in Christian terms is a way of being which sustains peace in our heart and relationships to others.

For a leader, expressing gratitude is a simple but powerful means of exercising Christian leadership. It builds confidence and good relationships. It generates encouragement and motivation. It creates an atmosphere of affirmation and positive feelings. It builds “peace at work” and fosters a sense of growth and development.

Sometimes, a simple expression of gratitude can do more than you think. Not long ago, I was chairing a meeting in which a team of leaders were reporting on difficult tasks they had carried for several weeks and would need to continue doing for some time. After their report I expressed more than the usual gratitude for an informative report and acknowledged the heavy personal demands on them and how deeply grateful I and the organisation I represent were. A few days later, I received a letter from one of them who told me how vitally encouraging it had been for him to hear those words of gratitude, because the going had been hard and he had often felt alone and drained by long and hard hours of work. By receiving thankfulness he had gained new strength and felt understood and supported by the wider organisation he was serving.

This is a positive experience, but how often do I forget to say those small words of gratitude to the people I lead? And what about you?

So much good effort is displayed in the church and we as leaders are called to acknowledge that – to God in our prayers, and to the people themselves in our interaction with them. Thankfulness generates positive feelings – also within ourselves. It helps us as leaders to maintain an optimistic and hopeful attitude, which is what Christ would expect of his disciples.

Gratitude can of course be expressed in many ways. There are occasions when words of gratitude are implied and we offer them more or less without thinking, simply because they are expected by the circumstances. That is a good thing. On other occasions, it may be sufficient to simply say “thanks” to somebody that performed well, either in person or by phone. It is good if this is part of our daily attitude to the people around us.

But I would suggest that a most efficient means of saying “thank you” is the written thank-you-letter. Its form suggests that you have thought of the person, taken time to express your gratitude (although all know how busy you are), and it leaves tangible evidence that can be saved and re-read when needed. When somebody has made a special effort to do good work or has done you a favour, it is worth-while to write a few lines and let the person know that you are thankful. Try it and see what positive effects it will have on your people, yourself, and your organisation.

Make your thank-you-letters brief, kind and honest. Thank those beside you, those you lead, and those who visit you from other church organisations. Sometimes this requires a degree of empathy, namely, of being able to see work contributions from the perspective of other people. A Christian leader, I would think, would want to develop such empathy and then act by expressing gratitude.

Look with new eyes at your work surrounding and seek to discover the people you always take for granted – when did you last say “thank you” to them? If you change, they will change, and it is likely that you, too, will be strengthened and encouraged by these people when they sense they work in a climate of gratitude – for they will soon want to return this Christian grace to others, including you. ♦

(Cont’d from page 1 — LEADERSHIP as RELATIONSHIP II)

can also give individuals a good sense of how their efforts contribute to the whole, or in other words, create significance and excitement. As with many processes, strategic planning has suffered not from visions of grandeur but from the tyranny of details and minutiae. The challenge is to find something that replaces traditional strategic planning. What would happen if a set of questions replaced the traditional targets and goals? A sense of direction would emerge, and, rather than focusing on a solution designed in the past with the data then available, at each decision point we would be guided by strategic questions. The decisions would then be made in ‘real-time’.

**Hiring and evaluations.** If we think of leadership as relationship, then the points of contact at hiring and evaluation become central to creating a sense of significance. We may have overlooked these moments as important relationship building opportunities. In what ways can we restructure our conversations at these critical moments so they result in active coaching and helpful individual feedback? How can we move from ‘telling’ (typical orientation and evaluation responses) to ‘experience’ (an on-going activity)? Of course, this takes more time and effort. But relationship requires active on-going involvement. For meaning to emerge, engagement must be mutual, stories shared, and feedback frequent.

**Social gatherings.** Bringing people together promotes connection and builds a sense of belonging. As community gathers, it also provides opportunities to create overall meaning and significance and to affirm individual and group efforts. But meeting without purpose can be counterproductive. How can we make every meeting or gathering count? How can our public and private gatherings build bridges between diverse

(Continues on page 3)
groups and individuals? How can we change the way we gather in committee meetings and move away from simply conducting business to the imperative of creating the future?

The short list is an easy one. Share stories. Ask questions. Give affirmation. Stories connect persons with history, place and aspirations. Questions such as what do you bring to the organisation and what will you add to the project provide opportunities for the individuals to give something back to the organisation. Affirmations create connections and give added meaning.

Leadership as relationship is best served by shifting the emphasis from ‘telling’ to ‘sharing’, from a focusing on a fixed ‘strategic point’ to developing a ‘sense of direction’, and from simply ‘conducting business’ to ‘creating the future’. The relationship develops by creating a ‘sense of mission’ rather than a ‘mission statement’, a ‘guiding vision’ rather than a ‘vision statement’, and collecting stories rather than lists of words. It remains dynamic and alive with guiding questions rather than remaining static with historically definitive statements. In other words, leadership as relationship can create a dynamic environment for those in the organisation to find meaning, significance, community, direction and excitement.

Leadership as Relationship shifts the way we look at our leadership tasks and helps create meaning, significance, community, direction and excitement. Here are a few examples:

Mission statements become a collection of stories.
“Our organisation is like this . . .”

Vision shifts from statements to questions.
“How will we want to do this tomorrow? What opportunities do we have today?”

Values grow from a list of words to a dynamic narrative.
“To illustrate our values, let me tell you what we do and why . . .”

Strategic planning takes on the form of guiding questions and a sense of direction.
“While responding to the immediate needs what must be put in place now to anticipate the needs of tomorrow? What do we need to start doing? What do we need to stop doing?”

Annual evaluations are replaced with coaching and frequent feedback.
“What do you bring to the organisation? What will you add to the project?”

Committees refocus from ‘conducting business’ to ‘creating the future’.
“How will we want to meet in the future? What conversations do we need in order to make it happen?”

To Think About... How to Add Value to Others

And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. Matthew 4,23

When people think about you, do they say to themselves, “My life is better because of that person? Their response probably answers the question of whether you are adding value to them. To succeed personally, you must try to help others. That’s why Zig Ziglar says, “You can get everything in life you want if you help enough other people get what they want.” How do you do that? How can you turn your focus from yourself and start adding value to others? You can do it by:

1. Putting others first in your thinking.
2. Finding out what others need.
3. Meeting that need with excellence and generosity. ♦