

VISION - ASSESSMENT

A T R U S T W O R T H Y S A Y I N G

NO. 11

Before every voyage, a good sailor has two considerations: the condition of his ship and the weather report. The first is internal and the second external. The sailor can improve the condition of the ship but can only respond to the weather.

Before a leader begins a visioning process, he or she must assess the condition of their organizations. Governance, finances, staff, facilities, programs, communication, and technology all need evaluating. But leaders also need to read the “weather reports” and evaluate the external conditions into which they are sailing. They cannot change the weather, but they can decide if it is a good day to stay in port or if the timing is right to face the challenges of the open sea.

Vision starts with assessment, and assessment demands honesty. An honest assessment may be difficult to obtain for several reasons. Often, we become oblivious to the frayed ropes, tattered sails, and leaks in our ship. We have lived with the problems so long they seem normal – at least to us. Sometimes we are so proud of the leaky boat we have built. We are reluctant to identify and deal with the flaws that are obvious to others. And some tender-hearted sailors assume that an honest evaluation might hurt feelings or appear judgmental.

Many times, an outside set of eyes is helpful to overcome the limitations of subjective bias. An honest assessment should begin with the board of directors. Are they active and engaged? Are they doing their job well? Are they interfering with the work of the staff? Finances need to be reviewed both in terms of income from donations, fees and other sources and expenses for both capital projects and operating costs. Staff assessment needs to be conducted for individuals, teams and the corporate structure. Is the organizational structure helping accomplish the mission? Does the culture reflect the values that are espoused? Are the programs targeted to accomplish the mission? Are the facilities supporting the ministry? Is information flowing appropriately within the organization and is the story being told powerfully to the outside world? Is technology up to date and is it being used effectively? These and many other questions need to be asked at the start of the visioning process.

For some leaders, vision is limited by a lack of awareness. They have never seen a ship that is four-masts tall, so they dream only of a one-mast sailboat. They need opportunities to have their world stretched and horizons extended. Leaders need to read widely, build a network of challenging, informed friends, travel often, and participate in associations and professional gatherings. These exercises will expand their awareness of opportunities and open them to broader challenges.

But what about that “weather report”? Leaders need to maintain a careful eye on the opportunities and threats that swirl outside of their control. Changes in the demographics, economics, politics, climate, technology and a host of other issues must be factored into a leader’s awareness.

A leader has no control over the weather, but he or she has a responsibility to look outside and assess the conditions into which they are sailing. The writer of Ecclesiastes understood mankind’s propensity to use external forces as an excuse for inactivity and the benefits of working hard and forging ahead as best we can. He said,

“Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. ... Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.” (Ecclesiastes 11:4 and 6)

Ironically, vision begins in the past. The future always has a history. An honest and thorough assessment of the organization’s current situation along with a keen awareness of the forces that are swirling outside of the organization’s control are critical as leaders forge a new and better future.

This lesson written by Dan Bolin is a part of a larger series on leadership called “A Trustworthy Saying.” Find more teaching/lessons available for download for free at: www.refuelinginfllight.com/trustworthysaying