



## Media Leadership

### *Leading your Organization with Creativity, Vision, and Influence*

By Phil Cooke

Over the course of my career in the media, I've had the opportunity to visit hundreds of churches, ministries, and Christian organizations and help them face a multitude of challenges using the media to reach this generation with the gospel. Over those nearly 3 decades, I've discovered 5 major areas of leadership that have to be confronted over and over again. I believe we may never make a real impact on this culture unless we can confront these critical challenges and overcome them.

All of us have a place in the greater plan of God to reach the lost. But the key to giving our best to the cause is understanding the playing field – what are the challenges out there? Who are the players? What resources are available? What mistakes have others made? What position can I best fill? Once we discover the answers to those questions, we can really begin to move forward.

My father was an All-State football player in high school, but in his younger years it took awhile for him to find the right position on the team. As a result, he spent a lot of time on the bench. One year, dad's team was in the playoffs, and as usual he was sitting on the bench. In a crucial play, the quarterback was hit and suddenly went down. A hush fell over the home team stands as the quarterback was helped off the field surrounded by players and coaches.

That's when the head coach looked down the long, lonely bench and yelled at dad: "*Cooke – get over here!*"

Dad excitedly got up and ran over to the head coach. Strangely though, they went around the side of the bleachers to a secluded area of the stands. The coach told dad: "*Listen, the starting quarterback got hit on that last play and split his pants. You're his size, so he needs your pants to finish the game.*" Dad reluctantly exchanged pants with the quarterback and walked back to the bench with a towel around his waist... while the quarterback went back into the game.

Different people are called to different levels of leadership, but the key principles are always the same. My dad started his football career humbly giving up his pants, but went on to be the best in the entire state at his position. So wherever we start – we need to do it humbly, but also with real sense of purpose.

That's why understanding these 5 leadership areas is so critical.

**1) Leaders Must Passionately Embrace Higher Quality Leadership:** I've had the opportunity to work with literally hundreds of organizations over the years – both Christian and secular - and I've decided that there is more management dysfunction in Christian organizations than anywhere else on the planet. Sure the Enrons, Global Crossings and WorldComs get more press because they represent much bigger financial stakes, but the fact is most American businesses are managed far better than most churches, ministries and ministry organizations.

For years we've talked about leadership within Christian media circles, but in reality we haven't done much about it. I work as a consultant with many organizations so I get to hear a variety of perspectives - from the guy in shipping all the way up to the head of the ministry. Do I get visionary, loyal, fired-up, cutting edge responses? Rarely. I usually get gripes, frustrations, anger and the sense that people are being used in places without any consideration to gifts, teamwork or real abilities.

So what can we do? First, we need to understand real leadership. Are you reading John Maxwell, Ken Blanchard and others whom God has given deep insights into leadership issues? Do you know the principles of true leadership and how to create an atmosphere where people will gladly face any obstacle to accomplish your vision?

Second, we need to hire people based on real gifts and talents – not on the strength of their testimonies, hard luck stories or their relatives. Of course we care about people and of course we want to help, but as Jack Welch - legendary CEO of General Electric says – *“If you leave someone in a position they can't handle – even out of pity – you not only hurt the organization, you hurt them. Because you're giving them a false sense of accomplishment, and keeping them from discovering the real place where their gifts and talents can be used.”*

Finally, we need to understand what business we're in. We're not so much in the “ministry” business – we're in the “influence” business. Our job is to influence people with a new way of thinking to change their circumstances and transform their destiny. But, how much do you know about influence? How much do you know about the principles of communication that lead to someone changing their perspective about things, and changing their viewpoints? I don't think you'll get a homosexual man to reconsider changing his lifestyle by calling him ugly names on national TV. But, that's exactly what some organizations do. I don't think you'll get people to change their attitudes about abortion by constantly hammering on the people who get abortions. But, that's exactly what some organizations do.

It's time we moved from the era of radio and TV preachers to the era of radio and TV producers. For years, the people in front of the microphone and in front of the camera have controlled Christian media. Frankly, they've usually done a great job and are the undisputed pioneers of this industry. While many of us were sitting on our duff, it was preachers that were out presenting the gospel on radio, television, even in movies and now the Internet.

But, I believe that era has come to a close. Because of changes in the media landscape, the complexity and expense of projects, the need to expand our creativity and a better understanding of the techniques for reaching audiences, control of what we do needs to come from behind the microphone and camera.

I'm the first to agree that good preaching is fantastic – but it's only one way to reach the mass audience. We now understand the power of documentaries, music programming, comedy, drama and experimental projects. Believe me – I've learned from experience working with hundreds of pastors and evangelists – when you're a hammer, you see everything as a nail. To a preacher every problem can be solved by a good sermon – they are wired for it, it's their gift and I love them for it.

But, we who sit behind the camera and microphone can see a much bigger picture – and understand that what Christian media is doing right now is only a small part of how we can reach this culture as we enter the new millennium.

To reach this culture we have to develop INFLUENCE. *That's why leaders must passionately embrace higher quality leadership.*

**2) Leaders Must Passionately Embrace Creative Thinking** - We're losing the culture war because our competitors are telling better stories than we are. Let's face it – we work in the industry, yet how many of us race home from work so we can enjoy our favorite Christian TV or radio program? We're being out-thought by the secular world and it shows in the creative aspects of the programs we produce.

I'm sick to death of people pitching me programs with the line “Phil, what we need is a Christian version of Oprah”, or “Have you seen Jay Leno? Why can't we do a Christian version of that?”

I'll tell you why I hate it – because we ought to be doing so much better! We worship the ultimate Creator of the universe, and yet our creativity stinks!

My dream is to walk down the corridors at a major Hollywood studio and overhear a conversation from their executives saying “You know, what we need is a secular version of this really great program I saw on a Christian network last night.”

Recently, I watched some old tapes from the 50's of Christian broadcasters like Fulton Sheen and Oral Roberts. You know what? It's 50 years later and our programs

are pretty much the same thing: same format, same preaching style. We're in color now, but that's pretty much all that's different. I was amazed that in 50 years our creative values have not progressed much more than that.

Some will say: "*Phil – my program may not be the most creative, but it's the content that counts*".

Actually – no it's not.

Research and my own professional experience has shown me that television audiences today only take between 3-5 seconds to decide whether or not to watch your program. If you've ever sat on the sofa with a remote in your hands you know I'm telling the truth – especially you men. At my home in Burbank, we already have nearly 500 channels and my wife will confirm that I probably only give each one about 2 seconds max. So, no matter how powerful your message is, if the audience doesn't watch long enough to hear it you've failed.

*That's why leaders must passionately embrace creative thinking - to quickly capture the attention of your audience.*

**3) Leaders Must Passionately Understand the Culture.** When I was growing up in the 50's and 60's in the South, the pulpit determined the behavior of this country. My dad was a pastor and was the most respected guy in the community. Even people who would never consider coming to church still respected my dad and his principles because the church had real authority. But today, movies and prime time television determine the moral climate of this country. Teenagers learn their behavior - not from school, friends, or even parents – but from television and movies. Therefore, if we don't have a voice in those arenas we won't make much of an impact.

Today, popular culture is the heartbeat of this country. Paul understood the power of culture when he approached the philosophers in Athens in Acts 17. Sure, he could have said: "*I'm going to preach the gospel, and I'm going to preach it without compromise no matter what.*" But he didn't do that. He respected their culture, their values and their ideas. Once he won their respect he was able to reach them in a far deeper way.

MTV has captured the hearts and minds of our young people. You don't have to like their programming – but do you know why it works? If you have a heart to reach young people, you need to know why MTV, Nickelodeon and other successful companies work. Do you know why Nike, Budweiser and other companies produce successful advertising?

*Leaders must passionately understand the culture.*

**4) Leaders Must Passionately Embrace Financial Opportunities** – Now, before you think I'm going to start preaching about giving let me explain what I believe true prosperity, affluence or wealth really is. I believe real prosperity is a divine provision necessary to accomplish what God has called us to do. The media world is a very

expensive business. Trying to reach people with the gospel on a regional, national or international scale takes a lot of money.

I'm realizing that money is a critical key to our future. For instance, I really believe we can talk about production values, creativity and technical issues all day long, but the person who changes Christian television will be the person who changes the way it's funded. As long as we're following the historic paid time model and asking for money on the air, we're never going to get the level of funding to produce high quality specials, documentaries, music programming or movies. If that model works for you, great – but it doesn't really work for most Christian producers and programmers.

That's why I'm concerned that we're not putting enough effort into financial issues in Christian media. In Hollywood, you see firsthand how much effort the studios and networks put into financial issues, because funding drives the business.

And you'd be amazed at the number of ministries that teach prosperity, but are the most tightwad organizations I've ever seen. They pay their people minimum wage, rarely give them a raise, financial incentives or other monetary considerations. Don't bleed your people dry – value what they bring to the table. (If they don't bring anything to the table, maybe you've hired the wrong person.) Stop paying a fortune for equipment and expecting people to work for nothing.

One other thing – find a successful Christian businessperson in your area and start spending time with them. Successful business people think differently. They value different things and we can learn so much from their perspectives.

I know of a Christian station manager who has begun virtual partnerships with successful businesspeople in his community. He spends time with them mining their experience, advice and expertise. As a result they have helped him get loans, develop credit lines with banks, get equipment at discount prices, find free donations from vendors, hire qualified staff and learn visionary thinking. It has totally changed everything about the way the station operates. They've gone from a poverty mentality to a success mentality almost overnight.

*That's why leaders must passionately embrace financial opportunities - to do what God has called them to do.*

**5) Finally, Leaders Must Passionately Embrace Planting Seeds.** No – I'm not going to take an offering. Today, most ministry organizations are obsessed with the harvest. They're obsessed with numbers, salvations and mailing lists. On the surface all that sounds great – but according to the Bible and the laws of nature, a harvest can't happen without planting seeds. When the Bible talks about a harvest, it doesn't forget that harvest came because someone planted seeds.

I recently finished my Ph.D., and my dissertation was a study of cinema and theology. In that process I studied The Engel Scale, which is a chart created by Dr.

James Engel when he was with the Billy Graham School of Evangelism, identifying 8 clear steps a person goes through in the process of accepting Christ. It indicates that arriving at the salvation moment is really a process, not a one-decision event. One major crusade ministry told me that they did an informal survey among people who had accepted Christ at their crusades over a year and discovered that each person had been confronted with the gospel message an average of 17 times before they finally made a decision.

*That means others planted an average of 17 seeds before each harvest.*

Tim Downs has written a remarkable book: “Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community...While We Still Can.” He gives a wonderful example of two young men who go before the Missions Committee at their local church for financial support. One wants to go into the mission field, and the other wants to attend the UCLA Film School. Guess which one gets the money? The missionary of course – even though the Film School student has the potential of reaching far more people with the gospel through the media.

*We have to change the thinking of how the church views evangelism, and that’s why leaders must passionately embrace planting seeds.*

Leaders must passionately embrace:

*Higher Quality Leadership*

*Creative Thinking*

*Understanding the Culture*

*Financial Opportunities*

*Planting Seeds*

What will that do? It will show us how to lead the industry to more creative and effective programming, penetrate the culture with the gospel, find the funding to accomplish our goals and learn the process that leads to a more effective harvest.

*And for me – that’s what it’s all about.*

When my dad tells the story of when he gave his pants to the quarterback so the team could continue the high school football game, he never fails to mention that on the very next play the quarterback ran 40 yards for the winning touchdown.

And with a proud gleam in his eye, my dad adds, “And he did it in my pants!”

When it comes to the media, we’re not all major players. - I wouldn’t be considered a quarterback or even a blocker. Maybe all some of us can do is “donate our pants”. But whatever leadership role God calls us to, and whatever our contribution, if we can master these five areas it will dramatically enhance our ability make an impact in this generation.

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