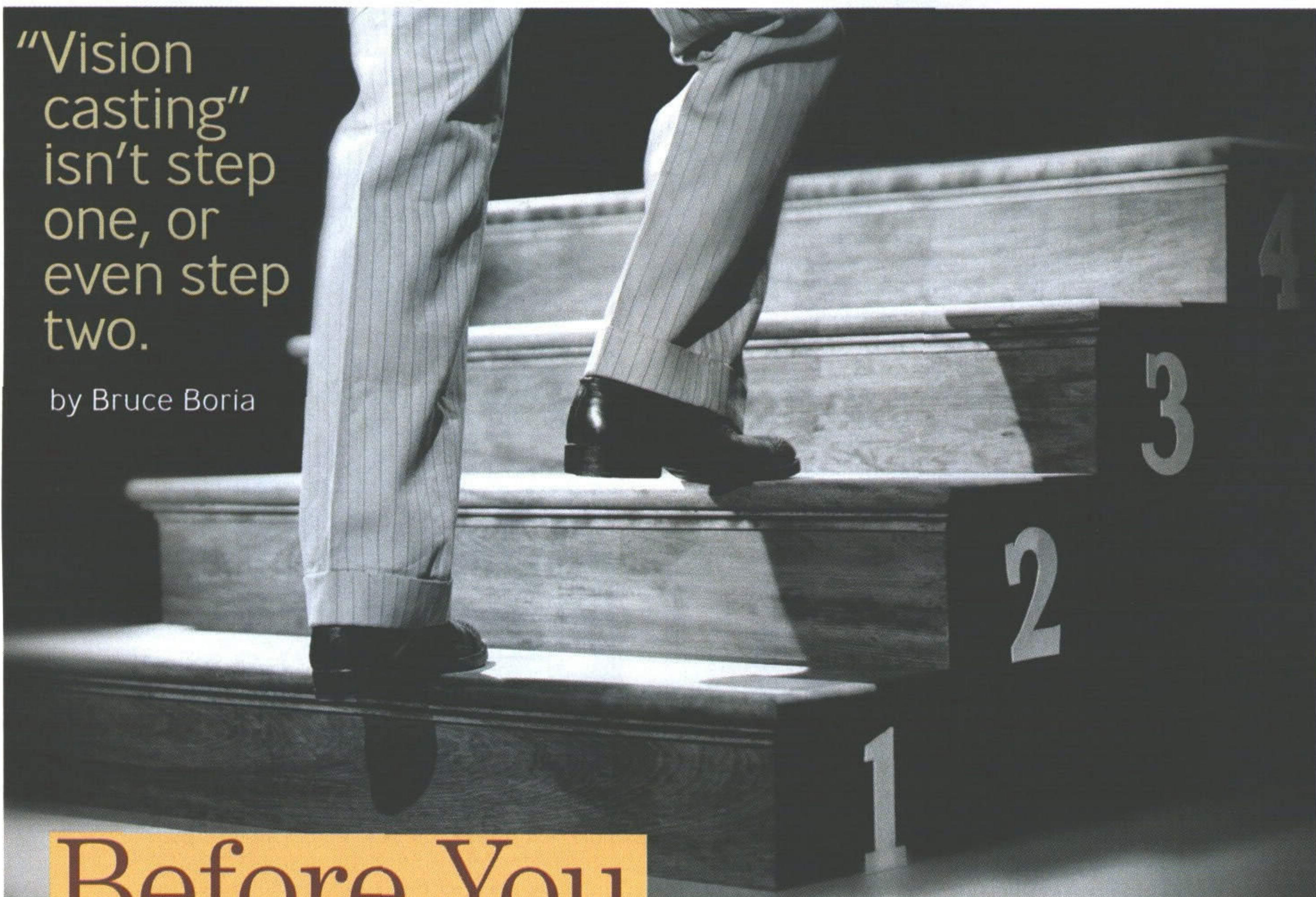


"Vision casting" isn't step one, or even step two.

by Bruce Boria



Before You Introduce Change

Bringing change to an organization isn't easy. Everyone who has ever led a church would agree. Perhaps it's a congregation that's aging and isn't connecting with younger people, but no one wants to make changes that would welcome younger people and integrate them into the life of the church.

Perhaps it's a congregation that has a full calendar and keeps its people busy, but isn't engaged at all with people in the community outside the church.

Where do you start with the necessary changes?

John Kotter, an expert on leadership at the Harvard Business School, has studied how the best organizations actually "do" significant change. He suggests that useful

change tends to be associated with a multi-step process, which creates power and motivation sufficient to overcome the inertia, obstacles, and inevitable resistance.

In his book *Leading Change*, he outlines this eight-step process:

1. Establish a sense of urgency.
2. Create a guiding coalition
3. Develop a vision and strategy
4. Communicate the change vision
5. Empower broad-based action
6. Generate short-term wins
7. Consolidate wins and produce more change
8. Anchor new approaches into the culture.

I've found his process has substantial implications for



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guiding change in my church.

In Kotter's opinion the first three steps are necessary to defrost a hardened status quo. Steps four to seven introduce a number of new practices. And the last step grounds the changes into the organization's culture.

My mistake (and in my observation, the mistake of most churches introducing change) has been to start at step 4: communicating the vision. But Kotter cautions that steps 4, 5, and following won't succeed unless steps 1 through 3 are implemented.

Without the first three steps, there is rarely a solid enough foundation to bring about lasting change. Here's what I've learned about the needed preparation before changes are introduced and the "vision is cast."

A sense of urgency

Establishing a sense of urgency means that people in the church recognize that there's a real problem. Until they sense "Something's got to be done," too often a congregation will live in denial.

This can be due to the comfort afforded by past successes, a lack of a visible crisis, low standards of performance, or fuzzy thinking about the church's purpose. Others are paralyzed by the complexity of change. The response is to become passive. Whatever the cause, such complacency must be torn down. Honesty is required, honest talk that is well-informed.

I had recently become senior pastor of a prominent church with a glorious history in Portland, Oregon. The church enjoyed a storied past that included a number of church plants and the establishment of Western Seminary.

More recently, however, the church had experienced significant pastoral turnover, four senior pastors in eight years, and the congregation was seriously graying.

At my first annual business meeting, I was asked, "What changes do you expect to introduce to the congregation?" The question was asked by one of our older members, one of more than 600 seniors who attended the church. While they enjoyed the church programs and adult Christian education classes, almost no one between 20-40 years old attended. I knew if any plans for the future were to succeed, it would require the support of this senior population. But I also knew they did not sense a crisis.



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"I'd like everyone to stand who has children," I said. Nearly the entire congregation stood.

"Now I'd like those who have children that are not attending church on a regular basis to please sit down," I said. Hesitantly, nearly three-quarters of the group sat down. You could hear an audible murmur of surprise.

Then I asked those still standing, "Please sit down if your children who DO attend church are NOT attending here at Hinson Memorial." Nearly two-thirds of those still standing then sat down. Only about a dozen remained on



their feet. By this time, there was a buzz in the auditorium.

"Let's think about the future," I said. "For this church to succeed in the future, we need to address this situation. What will it take for us to create an environment where your children and grandchildren would view Hinson as an option for their spiritual growth? For any future plans to succeed, it will require that you, the senior population, support the changes."

I promised not to marginalize the seniors in our planning, and they pledged their support to address the crisis they were just now beginning to recognize.

Within a year we had formulated plans for a new worship service and an additional worship leader for this new service. When we started a contemporary service with the next generation in mind, the seniors even agreed that it could be held at the 10:30 hour to accommodate the younger families with children. And the traditional service met at 9 a.m. The financial needs of this new initiative were undergirded in large part by our senior population.

Within a year and a half, attendance at the contemporary service had nearly doubled the attendance at the earlier service. The response from the seniors was very positive. I don't think that would have been the case without them first sensing the urgency. But when that happened, it was amazing that much of the potential resistance never developed.

A guiding coalition

It's equally important to have a diverse group, a "coalition," develop and plan the possible changes. Unfortunately, it took me awhile to realize the importance of this. In my enthusiasm, I have often run way out in front of my congregation and beckoned them to follow.

My father, a career U.S. Marine, would remind me that

if a leader turns around and finds no one following, he is not leading; he is simply taking a walk.

As pastor, I have taken many solitary walks.

One time I had the great idea to host a fair as an outreach to our community, complete with Christian bands, activities for kids, and food. It required publicity, outdoor staging, portable restrooms, generators for electricity, and lots more. I managed to recruit a few volunteers, but the bulk of the responsibilities fell on my shoulders.

The weekend for the event arrived, but a severe storm cancelled the weekend festivities.

At the Sunday worship service, the members of the congregation offered sincere condolences. To me! They were genuinely sorry for me! Their response underscored the fact that they weren't particularly upset that the event didn't happen. There was little ownership for this major outreach event.

I failed to create a guiding coalition that would work with me to ensure that the church was engaged in this outreach.

Since then I've made sure to draw in other people with sufficient influence and authority so that any changes are not just "my" project.

A group that works together can accomplish much more than what the individuals could do separately. The benefit of group solidarity on a congregation is immeasurable.

Creating a coalition of men and women of influence helps to silence the voices of discontent and to confront the sowers of discord. It also helps remove the obstacles to change and helps bring a new and healthy attitude as new challenges are faced.

Develop both vision and a strategy

Vision and strategy are easier to accomplish when there is a sense of urgency that is widely recognized, and is getting the attention of a guiding coalition. But in addition, there must be clarity of both the purpose and the process.

At an informal evening gathering, a member of the church asked me if I had a sense where the church was headed. Before I could answer, a successful businessman in the church responded, "Why are you asking the pastor such a question? Have you ever met a pastor who had a strategic plan?"

My wife, sitting next to me, gently placed her hand on my knee and patted it gently. I responded to the first gentleman that I was planning to address this at the annual meeting in a few months.

On the car ride home, my wife said she didn't realize I had formulated plans for that meeting.

"I haven't," I said, "but rest assured, I will have a plan!"

Over the next few weeks, I gathered hosts for small group gatherings within the congregation. I held approximately 50 meetings and asked those gathering for their perceptions about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats surrounding the ministry. I collected their responses and paid particular attention to the common themes being expressed.

Drawing in the coalition of leaders, we discussed at length the findings and began to formulate a plan for the future.

The vision had two parts: (1) to reach out to our surrounding neighborhood, and (2) to build deeper community within the church body.

The plans for outreach began with a neighborhood picnic on a Sunday morning in a nearby park, complete with a worship service, amusement rides for the kids, music, and food. We collected from our church members 250 backpacks filled with school supplies, and we gave one to each child from the neighborhood who was in elementary school. We fed nearly 2,000 of our neighbors. And this event built relationships and goodwill with the neighborhood.

We also developed plans to make our building much more user-friendly. We improved signage, replaced the formidable solid wooden doors on the outside of the building with glass doors (which presented a much more inviting appearance), and dramatically refurbished the fellowship hall (where few people chose to linger) to look more like a Starbucks coffee shop, complete with an espresso bar, and the interaction among our people dramatically increased.

The intentional plan for discipleship included a restructuring of our adult education ministries with an integrated curriculum, the funding for a new small groups pastor position, and additional resources dedicated to our children's and student ministry.

After presenting the plan at the congregational meeting, the businessman who was so critical of the past pastors was the first to come forward and commend the plan. His blessing helped to galvanize his peers, and the church moved forward toward fulfilling the new vision.

Leading change is not a solo sport. And it doesn't start with "vision casting." Creating a sense of urgency, building informed, engaged, guiding coalitions, and articulating both a vision and a strategy will require our best efforts. But it will give new life to our ministries. The road of change should not be the road less traveled. 

