

A New Model for Ministry Leadership

As a Christian university president, I never *planned* to:

- start an NCAA football program from scratch
- launch a school of nursing as a result of our “old main” building falling down
- develop the world’s premier Christian University for the Arts
- build a network of branch campuses across the South, and then close most of them years later
- create the largest online Christian university MBA program in China
- develop a campus community that is a beacon for racial reconciliation in the Deep South

The most critical turning points and breakthroughs of ministry are rarely planned. I can prove that to you if you hang in there with me for the first few pages of this book.

In 2002, I purposely began to let go of the iron grip all leaders have on planning as the foundation of focus and energy. It was a struggle that took over a decade until, as a university, we were entirely driven by *capturing opportunities* rather than *building plans*.

Paradoxically, relinquishing planning is the single best thing I’ve ever done in my professional ministry life—and also the scariest. It was complex to accomplish but also simple. And, even though it took a long time to implement, it changed everything overnight.

My evolution away from dependency on traditional planning was worth it all. This shift opened up growth, reach, and ministry that would never have been imaginable if I had stayed welded to

conventional planning. And, as a bonus, it has brought a personal joy and freedom in leadership that I never thought possible.

Opportunity Leadership—the model of leadership that I’ve developed as I’ve shifted focus away from traditional planning—is almost bewildering to those who have never experienced it. I’m often asked questions like:

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- How is it possible to provide leadership without a plan for the future?
- How do you gain buy-in from stakeholders without a planning structure?
- How do you get agreement on where you are headed, measure your effectiveness, or even know what’s next without a plan?

I’ve learned that the only way to convince skeptics of Opportunity Leadership is to show them the results.

COVID-19 is the most straightforward example of why traditional planning is ineffective. Did your ministry plan for it? Did anyone? Of course not! But we all dealt with it, made adjustments rapidly, and even found ways to significantly improve our “normal ministry”—even though a simultaneous worldwide pandemic was

not included in the five-year plan of a single ministry leader.

When the virus hit, every long-range organizational plan was tossed in the trash, and we all became stronger leaders because we couldn't depend on a pre-determined plan to cope with this challenge. Instead, this "opportunity of crisis" required us to provide leadership through it. And most importantly, we all became more dependent on God for the future rather than leaning on our carefully crafted plans.

For ministries, the jarring and speedy adjustments we made during COVID-19 were a forced push to step into the core of Opportunity Leadership. It's a model of leadership that begins and ends with complete trust in God for a ministry's direction. It allows future destinations to be ordered by His hand and loosens our iron grip on the wheel of control. When we embrace it, we join those leaders who have become free from the overwhelming burden of determining what is best for their ministry. We no longer need to manipulate our efforts and circumstances to engineer outcomes that force pre-determined destinations to be reached.

Opportunity Leadership is grounded in waiting in anticipation for God-given opportunities to develop that mesh seamlessly with our mission, gifting, and capacity—propelling us to destinations that are heavenly ordained. As a result, we become leaders who hone traits that enable us to become highly sensitive to the wind of God and create an organizational culture that allows us to respond to new opportunities with urgency, adeptness, and energy.

Proof That Opportunity Leadership Works

If you've been schooled in the practices of leadership, I know you're already skeptical that leading without a plan is possible. Let me start by addressing any initial doubts you have about my challenge to discard planning. After that, I'll demonstrate why Opportunity Leadership is a superior path.

Following the organizational patterns developed by the corporate community, most ministry leaders are so deeply embedded in traditional planning structures that these ideas may appear on the page like a foreign language. But I assure you, even leaders in the most bureaucratic structures can implement at least small portions of this model—and the slightest movement toward Opportunity Leadership will be uplifting for you and your ministry.

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I'd never before seen leadership unbuckled from planning and had to find my way in the dark. You won't have to because you'll get the benefit of learning from my experience. I'll outline the why, who, and how of implementing the model based on my years of developing Opportunity Leadership by trial and error. You'll be encouraged that making the shifts necessary to embrace the entirety of the Opportunity Leadership model requires a slow, gradual, and purposeful change and

is not best accomplished with dramatic acceleration or sharp turns. And to help you chart your path, I'll share the war stories—good and bad—for how Opportunity Leadership gets lived out because this is an in-the-trenches practical model for leaders like you.

One caution, though. Don't worry about getting a clear answer to the end-point question of how you're going to do this in your current leadership role—that's planning. Instead, just start by capturing the opportunities for change that are easily grasped in the low-hanging fruit of the model, and then let the rest work itself out with time—that's Opportunity Leadership.

Now, let's look at the proof that this leadership model really works. In our early years of living by the Opportunity Leadership

principles as a university, I was stopped cold after writing a grant request to a foundation. The application asked for a summary of the significant accomplishments of the previous five years. Not thinking much about it, I quickly jotted down those advances that stood out in my memory. But when I saw all that God had done written down on a single piece of paper, I was overwhelmed.

I knew right then that I had to devise a creative way to share with my board of trustees the same astonishment and celebrate God's blessings. Here's how it happened.

As a university, we don't do planning—we capture opportunities. For years the board had been 100 percent supportive of Opportunity Leadership, so looks of confusion shrouded the room when I laid before them what appeared to be a five-year aggressive comprehensive plan for the university.

In the style of a traditional planning leadership model, the document focused on five significant overarching goals, along with a list of seventy-two implementation targets. At most universities, a board would look at the paper with excitement to see what might be ahead and prepare to work with the president to launch an eighteen-month-long series of discussions across the campus to refine the goals and objectives list and gain input and buy-in from all sectors of stakeholders.

But my board studied the document before them with puzzlement. They knew I didn't believe in what I identify as "destination planning" and that, as a university, we had purposefully made the shift completely away from the long-range planning model that has become a fortress for nearly all leaders. As a board, we had talked repeatedly over the previous years about our commitment to stop projecting God's destinations, but instead build a faith, philosophy, and team

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that is sensitive to the wind of God and moves quickly to capture opportunities when it blows. Our remarkable success in the preceding years was a result of Opportunity Leadership. It was the hallmark on which we had built our future as a university.

Despite their questioning looks, I pressed on with my presentation, beginning to read aloud the goals of the five-year plan, even though I could almost hear the board members' silent reactions of alarm in response to the bold benchmarks.

Belhaven University Five-Year Goals

1. Increase enrollment 43 percent

Impossible! This would make us one of the fastest-growing universities in the country.

2. Raise \$21 million

Crazy!!! This is way too much money for us to raise that fast. Let's do a feasibility study.

3. Construct \$32 million of new buildings and renovations

Now, this is getting out of hand. Our job as a board is to slow this president WAY down.

4. Add seven undergraduate academic majors, including nursing, computer science, film, and social work

Nursing in itself is huge. How about two or maybe three majors, and then see how we are doing?

5. Add eight graduate degrees, including dance, education, and leadership

Let's skinny this up, so we don't frustrate the faculty with failure because we took on too much.

As I read the first couple of goals, the look of disorientation

turned to distress and anxiety. As I got through the third goal, I began to see smiles on the faces of some of the longest-serving board members who figured out where I was going. And, by the time I'd finished announcing the fifth goal, all except the newest members realized what was happening.

The presentation was not a *projection* of the next five years. Instead, what I gave the board was a summary of what had been accomplished during the *previous* five years—a time during which we operated without a plan and focused on capturing opportunities.

Opportunity Leadership had changed everything for our university. If we had stayed cemented to traditional planning, and I had brought the same goals to our board five years previously (before they actually happened), their reaction would have been predictable:

1. The board would have questioned my ability as a leader because the plan was far too ambitious. Bluntly, they would have thought I was foolish or naive to recommend goals this bold.
2. The board would have cut the five-year goals in about half—and at best, our results would have been about half of what we actually achieved over those five years.

Plus, we would never have been amazed by what only God could do because we would have limited the plan to what we knew we could accomplish. And, we certainly wouldn't have gone on to add “with God's help” into the university's brochure.

This hard-results demonstration cemented our commitment to abandoning traditional planning and moving ahead with a confidence that God will bring us opportunities—although we have no idea what they might be. And since the time of this five-year validation, I've learned that surprises at this level were only the beginning of opportunities that the Lord would bring our way when we fully committed to Opportunity Leadership.

So gather your courage, set aside assumed leadership absolutes, cut up the box, and let's walk together to start capturing change rather than creating it. This book is the story of Opportunity Leadership lived out and it will help you do just that. It is not an idealized theoretical model of leadership, but a proven fresh approach to leadership that will free you from the confinement of traditional planning and bring you the joy of leading by catching the wind of God and trusting Him for both the opportunities and outcomes.

It is time for more Christian leaders to stop planning and start getting results!