



Book Discussion:

The Longview

Roger Parrott shares lasting strategies for rising leaders.

AT AGE 34, Roger Parrott became one of America's youngest college presidents. Today he is president of Belhaven University, an innovative, evangelical liberal arts school based in Jackson, Mississippi. *Outcomes* editor in chief W. Scott Brown interviewed Parrott about his new book, *The Longview: Lasting Strategies for Rising Leaders* (David C. Cook).

The Longview offers a fresh, scripturally based approach to helping ministry leaders defy the trend of short-sighted, quick-return goal making and embrace leading for long-term significance. Parrott argues that as more ministries adopt the prevailing short-term pattern, they move closer to the same outcome: a quick pay-off at the cost of a future crisis.

Leadership expert Ken Blanchard has said of the book, "Now more than ever, leaders everywhere are realizing that short-term thinking doesn't work. *The Longview* . . . is essential medicine for today's hurry-up, quick-fix lifestyle. Read this book, read it again, and apply its message to your life."

What is the core message of *The Longview*?

In the Christian world, we have gotten pretty good at building strong, fast, and impressive powerboats to go where we think God wants us to go. Instead, I believe God is calling us to build sailboats prepared to go wherever his wind takes us.

We have, in the strength of our powerboat building, pretty much ignored the wind. We can set the direction around conference tables to try to determine where God wants us to go, but we are missing a lot of our best ministry opportunities by not being in sailboats that respond to the wind.

You write that a short-term leadership perspective is devastating for ministry.

It's devastating in every aspect of life. God's pattern, whether in health, diet, exercise, relationships, managing money, or mentoring children, is the long view. I think God equipped us this way.

In the church we are following the pattern that the culture has set over the past 30 years. It started with the junk bonds of the 1980s. In the '90s it was the dot-coms and the acceleration of credit-card debt. In the last decade, it was flipping real-estate properties and risky subprime financing. You add to that a 24-hour news cycle that presents problems and expects immediate answers, and the whole thing is destined for failure. We are seeing it in Washington right now.

The church has followed that pattern because we tend to follow what business does. Fundraising accelerates this for ministries. We simplistically assume that people will give only to easy solutions with measurable results. We think they are not sophisticated enough to understand anything else. We build our ministries around that. And in so doing, we develop a checklist of successes, a tally list to measure and hold up, like a quarterly report for General Motors.

That is not how God measures success.

How can ministry leaders shift their paradigm?

It is a challenge. It's not simply saying, "I'm going to be a long-view leader, and I'm going to do it differently." If you don't build a culture around it, you can be idealistic all you want, but it's going to fail.

You have to help people understand. Take small steps. Infuse a small team with an understanding of long-view leadership, and hold up and articulate what really matters rather than a tally sheet of success. If you do it long enough, the culture will shift.

I just completed 15 years as president of Belhaven. For university presidents, every time we have an anniversary, we put something in a magazine to show how great we are and that nothing happened before we stepped on school grounds.

Instead, I wrote an article called "15 Years and Not Counting." Its theme was that I wasn't counting those kinds of successes. That's not how God measures success. God cares about the transformation of students' lives. God cares about graduates leaving with a vision for reaching the world and building strong families. God cares about the spirit of our chapel services. God cares about the deep integration of faith with an academic discipline so that students understand the foundation of faith in whatever their field of study. Unfortunately, that's not what is typically measured and held up.

A couple of years ago, I did an exercise with our board. I gave them a tally sheet of accomplishments of the previous 10 years.

It was pretty impressive—many millions of dollars in buildings and programs, enrollment up, and so on. Then I said, “If I had come to you 10 years ago and said ‘this is our plan, this is where we’re headed,’ first, you would have said I was crazy, and second, we would have cut it by about two-thirds to what we knew we could manage. Instead, by trusting God’s wind to take us where he wanted us to go, we were able to do much more than we could have on our own.”

If ministry CEOs can create cultures where people value the things that really matter rather than what’s easily measured, they will enjoy their work more, and it will be more significant in the long run. But it’s hard to get there. Our board gets it. They understand. But we talk about it a lot.

Short-term thinking doesn’t really work in the business world either, does it?

Much of the economic downturn we are in is due to short-term thinking. Long-term thinking is not how stock brokers and football coaches get rewarded. That’s not how the world does it. A Christian leader has to be willing to buck that trend.

I quote a study in the book titled, “If brands are built over years, why are they managed by quarters?” It provides three answers. First, we have access to real-time immediate data now that we never had before. It’s easy to measure things quickly. We could not do that in the past. Second, it’s getting harder to measure longitudinal things. People move. They are not in companies as long. Third, you just don’t get much time to prove your worth as a leader; if you don’t prove it fast, you’re out. We have created a Catch-22 around leadership. And if anybody ought to break free from it, it’s the church, because that’s not what Jesus taught us.

You say that leaders must be open to interruptions.

Absolutely. We are so pressured on our to-do lists that we miss some of our greatest ministry opportunities. Around here we plan for interruptions. We expect them. We look for interruptions, because they are often a gentle blowing of the wind.

How does a leader balance the need for flexibility with the need for planning?

To me the difference comes in separating preparation planning from destination planning. Much of the church has become focused on destination planning. But that’s not how we need to be planning.

Here, we spend a lot of time and energy planning for the journey, for the preparation, what we know is in front of us. We don’t plan for the destination of where that might lead. We don’t plan for a preconceived agenda of what God has for us beyond what he’s already made clear.

So often we leaders want to do strategic planning. That means the board goes away on a retreat someplace and dreams up ideas and takes them to everyone else for implementation.

We are doing it the other way around. We’re saying, “What’s the best we can get out of what we know God has given us right now? How can we squeeze every bit of success out of that and then see what opportunities that leads to?”

It’s a gentle breeze that God begins to blow into our sails. It’s not, “We’re going to do that because that would be a good thing to do, and by the way, we could raise a lot of money.” We don’t do destination planning. We do preparation planning.

What about long-term strategic planning?

First, whoever had a five-year plan five years ago doesn’t have one now. Nobody. Whatever your plan was in 2005 is out the door. Nobody can predict the future. We are projecting because it makes us feel productive. It gives us something to sell to donors. It makes us feel like we’re aggressive for the Lord and like we have special vision from him. But it’s not fulfilling God’s best purposes in our lives.

We were able to do much more over the previous decade than if we’d planned it. By taking it in smaller bites and taking it where God leads, seeing which doors open and which doors close, we were able to go farther and faster. A small, tired, beat-up sailboat will out-distance a powerboat every time. We like the impressiveness of our powerboats, but they do run out of gas.

But a sailboat has to be prepared to sail, right?

Absolutely. A sailboat takes a ton of preparation. After you build a powerboat, you’re ready to go. With a sailboat, you have to know what you’re doing. You have to have a well-equipped team and the right resources. That’s part of why we have been able to move on things. We have built the right culture, so that when a new idea comes, I already know how faculty will respond. We have a culture ready to respond to those needs because we’ve been preparing the boat for a long time, waiting.

When I think back to everything that’s happened here, none of it came because we sat around a conference table and planned. It came because God gave us direction, and we responded. Once we saw that direction, we started. Every time we get clarity on where we are going, we’re very careful to drill down and get the most out of it.

When you think of the next generation of leaders, are you hopeful?

I wrote the book because I sense in the next generation a desire to do things differently. The problem is that they don’t have a model for doing that because we’ve done it this other way so long. I don’t want to make us all feel guilty that we’re not doing long-view leadership. I want to share practical ideas for how to do it. And this next generation is primed and ready to do it. ●

To learn more about *The Longview*, visit TheLongview.info. To learn more about Belhaven University, visit Belhaven.edu.

