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Academic Leadership Journal

Can Business Leaders Learn From Leaders of

Today's Megachurches?

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In 2005, Malcolm Gladwell, author of the best selling books, *The Turning Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Little, Brown & Company, 2000) and *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little, Brown & Company, 2005), wrote an article titled *The Cellular Church* that appeared in *The New Yorker Magazine* (9/12/05). The article retells the story of the beginnings and the growth of Pastor Rick Warren's Saddleback Church located in the Saddleback Valley of Orange County, California. In re-reading the article I found an interesting quote attributed to Jack Welch, the former chairman of General Electric and a person considered by many to be the greatest leader/manager of the past century. In the article, Gladwell makes the following quote regarding a conversation Rick Warren had with Jack Welch, "I had dinner with Jack Welch last Sunday Night," he said. "He came to church, and we had dinner. I've been kind of mentoring him on his spiritual journey. And he said to me, 'Rick, you are the biggest thinker I have ever met in my life. The only other person I know who thinks globally like you is Rupert Murdoch.'"

After reading this quote I began thinking that if Rick Warren is capable of getting Jack Welch to think of him as such a big thinker what about all the other founders and leaders of the growing number of megachurches that have appeared over the past several years. For readers not familiar with the term megachurch it refers to non-denominational churches consisting of at least 2,500 members. There are numerous examples of megachurches but two better known examples are the Crystal Cathedral located in Garden Grove, California founded by Dr. Robert H. Schuller (now being led by his son Robert A. Schuller) and Lakewood Church, the 45,000 member mega-church founded by best selling author Joel Osteen located in what was the Compaq Center, the former home of the Houston Rockets professional basketball team. One other megachurch worth mentioning is Willow Creek in South Barrington, Illinois pastured by Bill Hybles.

Is there really any difference between these leaders and business leaders in how they drive home their visions? I guess it really comes back to that basic leadership tenant; having a VISION. It seems that in one way or another every successful leader not only has a vision for what they want to accomplish and an understanding of how to accomplish the vision but they have the perseverance and drive necessary to see the vision through to its completion. They also have a good amount of charisma as well. For those not familiar with the story of Robert H. Schuller he basically grew his congregation by renting out a drive-in theater on Sunday mornings. Today is best known for his campus in Garden Grove, California located in Orange County, California and his weekly television program, *The Hour of Power*,

It's most notable landmark is the Crystal Cathedral, a glass church built in 1973. There is also Joel Osteen, leader of the 43,000 member nondenominational Lakeview Church located in Houston, TX. Osteen reminds his followers that when he took over the ministry upon the death of his father he has second thoughts but he had a vision of where he wanted to take his ministry and how he wanted to get there. Today his services are conducted in the former home of the Houston Rockets Basketball team, the former Compaq Center.

So, what can business leaders learn from religious leaders? Well, how about the fact that without a vision and the ability to communicate it, no matter how grand, nothing great ever happens. It's the same old sermon; have a vision, communicate it, get people to believe in it and deliver on it.

The following quote on megachurch leadership appeared in an article by Frances Fitzgerald titled, *COME ONE, COME ALL, Building a megachurch in NewEngland* and appeared in the December 3, 2007 edition of *The New Yorker*. It is worthy of quoting in its entirety.

“Megachurch leaders are C.E.O.'s and many of them, particularly the seeker-church pastors, have borrowed techniques from big business. Hybles and Warren learned not just from Schuller but from the management expert Peter Drucker, and have found themselves become experts on the management and marketing of churches. Of all the megachurches, Willow Creek, the subject of a Harvard Business School study, must be the most professionally run; Hyble's executive pastor, Greg Hawkens, graduated from Stanford Business School and worked for McKinsey&Company; his communications director is a former executive of Allstate Insurance; and the author of the Harvard Business School study is now the head of the Willow Creek Association.”

In other articles I have written on the topic of effective leadership I have focused on what I consider to be three of the most important leadership components. These include having a vision, communicating that vision to individuals both inside and outside of the organization and making everyone a stakeholder in seeing the vision through to its conclusion. I have also used basketball coaches Bob Knight of Texas Tech, Pat Summitt of Tennessee and Mike Krzyzewski of Duke as examples of individuals who understand what it means to be an effective leader regardless of what their individual leadership styles may be. Perhaps leaders of megachurches should be added to this list.

It should be kept in mind that leading an organization as large as a megachurch is the same as leading a large corporation. One example of this is the manner in which megachurches have ventured out and have developed new business opportunities. Some examples of business ventures that megachurches have embraced include shopping malls in Chicago, Forest Park Mall; Tallowood Center in Houston and Rock Plaza in Detroit. Other business include pharmacy's, travel agencies, food-distribution centers, home loans, investment groups and coffee shops in addition to sports and event facilities such as The Dome in Anchorage, Alaska and the Riverbend Center in Austin, TX.

Just something to think about.

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