

K.P. Yohannan:

Someone once said that within the timeline of any movement, the original life, passion and vision would be sustained about 25 years. The excitement, freshness and newness are on a basic uphill incline up to that point. After that, things will begin to change. There will be more of a plateau effect on the distinctives of the movement.

During the early days of my ministry with Operation Mobilization, I heard its founder, George Verwer, speak about the problem of losing vision and passion. He said, "God raises up a man with a vision and heart for God, and that becomes a movement. Then it turns into a machine. Then it ends up becoming a monument, and it is history. It is dead."

This is exactly what happened to the YMCA, the Salvation Army and most mainline denominations, such as Methodist, Lutheran and Moravian. What glorious beginnings they had under godly leaders! But now look at some of the mission organization of the past and see "where are they today? The vision, the burden and passion are gone.

Unfortunately, I have found this to be true in organizations I have known. But the greater question to ask is when will we ever learn from others failure? Let us take a look at what changes.

Radical Becomes Conventional

In the secular world, a business's generation is also said to last about 25 years, after which freshness and vision and thus success decline. Japanese organizations, however, have manipulated this time frame through education and structure changes. They begin to implement changes after only about 10 years, before people become set in their ways and find difficulty adapting to change. In this way, businesses are perpetually moving on, without losing their edge and success in the industry.

After a certain point in the life of a movement, things somehow shift into "maintenance" mode. The life that was once radical is now a part of the past, a part of history; now the goal is simply to "do it the way we've always done it." What was once a fresh, flexible way of doing things now becomes a hard, stiff structure of rules, regulations and bylaws that we build around ourselves to feel some sort of protection.

Individuals now have positions on a variety of levels "some you can approach directly and others you cannot. By the time you attempt to go where you want within the organization, the structure is so complex you almost need a road map to navigate the maze!

A movement that has gone from radical to conventional is no longer regulated by vision and faith; instead, the decisions that come out of it are based on careful calculations of the lowest risk possible. Prayer meetings become planning meetings. Simple, childlike faith is replaced with smart, business-oriented brains. Change becomes nearly impossible because the ball and chain of bureaucracy is too strong.

This shift has happened to some of the finest movements in the history of the Church. Even right now there are some that are going through a terrible crisis. And we should not think that, regardless of the organization with which we serve, we are immune to this change. It can happen to us!

Keep in mind "I am not saying that structure is wrong. With the growth of any movement, structure is vital, for you cannot function without discipline. The last verse of the book of Judges says, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). The next verse in the Bible is Ruth 1:1, which says, ". . . there was a famine in the land." No army can survive without discipline. No nation can survive without discipline. And no organization can survive without discipline.

But what I am talking about is the heart. The danger we must avoid is not discipline and structure, but replacing love, enthusiasm, freedom and empowerment with laws, regulations and power-based structures. When that happens, do you know who pays for it? The lost world . . . and our children who are growing up within the context of our ministries.

Transformational Becomes Transactional

This is when the motivation changes from one of heart condition to one of external rewards and benefits. Instead of, "I am so excited to be here; God is fresh and real, and our family is growing in His grace," the attitude is more like, "What do I get out of it?" money, position, recognition? As time goes by in an organization, people start thinking more about benefits and vacation time than service from a sold-out heart.

When believers in the book of Acts were beaten up and persecuted, the Bible says that they regarded it as a privilege that they were considered worthy to suffer for Jesus' name (see Acts 5:41). Paul tells us in Philippians 1:29 that "it has been granted [to us] . . . to suffer for His sake, or in other words, our "gift to suffer." Tradition says that when Peter was eventually sentenced to die by crucifixion, he asked to be crucified head down, as he did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. For those who sold all to receive the precious pearl of great price, nothing could hold them back. They wouldn't ask, "What can I get out of it?" but rather, "What can I give?"

But as time passed, things began to change in the first-century church as well. Paul writes in Philippians 2:21, "All seek their own."

And what about you "where do you stand in this chronology? Are you feeling that the burden is too heavy for

you? Do you wonder, “How long can I keep doing this? It’s too hard to keep going. I don’t know why I am doing it anymore. What about the future? Is all this worth doing?” Somehow, very privately, deep within your heart, these questions and thoughts can begin to burn and grow, even while outwardly you appear to be full of enthusiasm and praise to God.

I am not saying in any way that we should not have a plan for vacation time, insurance benefits or any of these things. The danger lies, though, in our hearts going after these externals or after some kind of promotion or recognition. When that happens, the joy that used to fill your heart will fade away, and all that will be left is self-centered motivation.

Relational Becomes Rational

Back in the mid-80s, when God led one young man to join us and help with our computer, I remember the one question I asked him before we accepted him: “Are you willing to clean the toilets and wash the dishes for the rest of your life, and never touch another computer again?” You see, I wanted to know if he was willing to become a servant that’s all I wanted. When I heard that he was willing to do anything, then I was glad to have him join us.

I tell you this to make a point. My concern was not so much about whether or not he had a big degree or his expertise and skill in his area. I was looking for someone with a servant heart.

When an organization goes from relational to rational, its values change. Skill and competency become more important than allowing the Lord to work through people. Things are perceived rationally and logically rather than based on faith that will produce miracles.

But when God calls people to serve Him, He will look beyond the 99, who have the best brains but are not broken, to the 1 who is perhaps not as smart but who is humble and willing to be used. Paul says that God chose the foolish things of this world—the least and last, the nobodies—to confound the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27, KJV). That is His way. Paul tells us that he himself was gifted with a brilliant mind, a stellar education, an impeccable pedigree—but he valued knowing Christ above it all so he threw it away and regarded it as dung (Philippians 3:4–8, KJV).

What matters to God? Servanthood, brokenness and faithfulness. Look at Joseph’s life. How much education and training did he have to become prime minister? I don’t think he had ever been to school. How about Daniel—what type of preparation did he have to become one of the top rulers of Babylon? And what was Amos’s job that led him to become a prophet of the living God? David’s qualifications to become the mightiest king of Israel included sheep herding and being a refugee. These are not fairy tales. This is reality. This is the way God works.

Do I place a premium on ignorance, on people who have no ideas or education? No, that is not my point. What I am saying to you is that when an organization comes to the place where passion is no longer a central value and, instead, titles, recognition and degrees hold priority, it will go astray.

So what must be done in a situation like this? How can we walk carefully so that we can avoid these three pitfalls? Let us explore that in the next chapter.