

4.6 Sustaining Vision – Building Resilience

Leading in education is grounded in a picture of the future that inspires passion that lasts. While good leaders create vision, great leaders sustain it. Leaders demonstrate that hope is sticking around, providing consistency and dependability for the long term. Teams with sustained vision can still see where they are going in the dark times, and they grow through the difficulties they face together. Leaders show that resilience is not simply coping or working harder. Leaders are changed and transformed through adversity, as their skills and character are formed in the crucible of the challenge.

Sustaining Vision

The story of the people of Israel in the Old Testament is one of sustaining vision. There are complex dimensions to the narrative in terms of history, geography, politics, sociology, relationships with God, each other, and their enemies. There are times of revelation, dedication and flourishing, and long periods of confusion, suffering and patience. There are people who experience elation and success, and others who never get to see the future towards which they were leading (we might consider the timing of the death of Moses, still having not reached the promised land in Deuteronomy 34:12). While contemporary leadership discourse rightly places significant weight on creating and sharing a vision, the idea of sustenance for the long-term is central to the biblical narrative.

Sustaining is not simply doggedly holding to a particular position, or reinforcing particular traditions, but rather it is about the basic convictions and commitments we live by and grow in, and being open to radical change. Vision is sustainable even if circumstances and situations are against you. The prophet Jeremiah shares the secret of long-term flourishing – “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.” (Jeremiah 17:7-8) Then, he writes with encouragement and hope: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope... When you search

for me, you will find me...” (Jeremiah 29:4-13) That letter has encouraged many going through crises to sustain in the present the practices and prayer required by commitment to future generations.

Contrary to some short-term and volatile elements of our educational landscape, a Christian vision is oriented to the long term, and sustained through drought and plenty, through highs and lows, or, as Paul puts it, “through good report and bad report” (2 Corinthians 6:8). He explains this vision is ambitious – “Therefore since we have such a hope, we are very bold.” (2 Corinthians 3:12) – and requires orientation beyond our current reality towards what is not yet visible – “for we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Sustaining vision is an inherently patient leadership activity.

Paul is writing to a church in Corinth that was still very young, at its foundational stage. He had already inspired them with the expansive vision of what a church could be in 1 Corinthians, with teaching about the cross and the resurrection, having “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16), teamwork, leadership, ethics, the Lord’s Supper, worship, gifting, how to be a united community, and love put into action. However, just a few years later, things were not going as well, and the vision, which had started off so promisingly, needed to be sustained. A Christian understanding of vision does not assume that everything is consistently getting better. It acknowledges that life is not like that, and recognises that in seeking to sustain vision, the building of resilience in individuals and teams is vital.

1. How important are consistency, dependability and ‘sticking around’ in leadership?
2. What resources does your team need to draw on in order to sustain a vision, as oppose to merely create it?
3. To what extent do you agree that ‘Vision is sustainable even if circumstances and situations are against you’? How could this be reflected in your actions and decision making?
4. How could prayer help you gain a different perspective on your situation? How could you make time for this, in the rhythm of your day? Who would be good to share with?