

Practical Guidelines for Getting Things Done

From Vision to Faithful Execution

Purpose

This resource is designed to help individuals and teams steward important work in a way that honors God, cares for people, and produces responsible action. Both the way we carry the work and the results we pursue matter.

What follows offers a practical path for moving from vision to action with clear direction, thoughtful priorities, and consistent follow-through.

Introduction

Nehemiah stood before a broken wall and a broken people. Jerusalem lay in ruins. Its gates had been burned, its defenses were gone, and its people were living with disgrace.

When Nehemiah heard the report, he did not rush immediately into action. He sat down. He wept, fasted, and prayed. Then, when the time was right, he went to the king with a specific request.

Before leaving, Nehemiah secured permission and resources. After arriving in Jerusalem, he quietly inspected the walls. He called the people together, assigned sections of the work, and remained close enough to respond when opposition arose. Fifty-two days later, the wall was complete.

Nehemiah did not begin with activity. He began with a burden that led him into prayerful agreement with God. Then he moved with courage and practical wisdom.

That distinction has helped me many times. Prayer and planning belong together. We seek God before we act, and we continue seeking Him as the work unfolds. Once the direction becomes clear, however, we are responsible for helping people understand the work and following it through.

This is where many worthwhile efforts struggle. Often, the problem is not a lack of vision. It is the gap between vision and execution. We may begin with a good idea or something we believe God is asking us to do, but still struggle to turn it into a few priorities, practical plans, and steady action. Priorities compete, attention drifts, and people become busy without being sure that the work is moving toward the intended result.

Getting things done faithfully begins with knowing where we are going and why it matters. From there, we choose what deserves attention, decide what must be done, assign responsibility, and return often enough to learn and adjust.

The process has five parts:

Set Direction > Choose Priorities > Build SMART Goals > Build Action Plans > Review Progress Regularly and Adjust as Needed

Appendix A shows how the complete process was applied to an actual staffing-system project. Appendix B helps determine when the complete process is needed and when a lighter approach will be enough.

Framework Overview

People need to understand where they are going. Without a defined destination and a practical way forward, they can remain busy while making little progress toward what matters most.

Stephen R. Covey popularized the principle of beginning with the end in mind in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. That is an important starting point, but vision alone is not enough. We also have to answer the practical questions that create a way forward.

Our responsibility is not only to talk about where we hope to go. We also need to help translate that direction into work people can understand and carry.

This process is especially useful for changing a culture, helping leaders grow, bringing a ministry together around a shared purpose, and carrying small to medium-sized projects. Larger or more complicated efforts may require additional planning tools, but these principles still provide a useful foundation.

Not every responsibility requires the complete process. When the direction is unclear or several people need to reach agreement, take the time to establish a shared understanding. When the outcome is already understood, move more quickly into goals and action. The purpose is not to add unnecessary structure, but to give the work the amount of thought it honestly requires.

Guiding Principles

Clear direction helps people move together. Focus keeps attention on what matters most. Accountability helps people follow through.

Kingdom Perspective

We are called to work with God, planning and building wisely while remaining dependent upon the Holy Spirit. This is part of faithful stewardship.

There is always a temptation to care so much about the result that we use methods that do not reflect God's heart. A good outcome does not justify every way of reaching it. How we treat people and how we carry the work matter deeply.

We do not simply decide what we want to accomplish and then ask God to bless it. For me, vision begins by asking what God is doing and how we should respond. That does not remove the need for planning. It changes the spirit in which we plan.

With that foundation in place, we begin by establishing direction.

Part One: Set Direction

Intentional thought at the beginning often determines how well the work will be carried later. This part requires us to slow down long enough to think, pray, listen, and understand.

The questions that follow are adapted from Terry Cook's *Lead, Develop, Care: Shaping a Different Kind of Leader* and are used by permission.

Who should be involved?

Identify the owner, decision-makers, contributors, and advisers. Be clear about who will coordinate the work, who has authority to make decisions, whose knowledge or experience is needed, and who should be consulted. Clarifying these roles early can prevent confusion later.

Where are we going?

Describe the desired outcome simply and specifically. People need to know what we are trying to accomplish. If the destination cannot be stated clearly, the work may not yet be ready to move forward.

Why are we going there?

Explain why the work matters and what is at stake. A meaningful reason helps people understand why the work deserves their attention. It can also sustain commitment when the effort becomes difficult.

What does success look like?

Describe the results that will show whether meaningful progress has been made. Whenever possible, identify outcomes people can observe or measure. Not every important result can be reduced to a number. Trust, maturity, and the health of a culture may also require careful observation and honest conversation.

What are our current realities?

Consider what is working, what is not, and the opportunities and risks before us. A clear view of the present keeps us from building a plan on assumptions. We need enough honesty to recognize strengths, weaknesses, available resources, unresolved concerns, and conditions that could affect the work.

The depth of this assessment should match the size and complexity of the responsibility. A simple effort may require only a brief conversation. Work that affects many people or carries greater risk may require broader involvement and more careful thought.

Which boundaries are needed?

Clarify the values, authority, resources, timing, and scope that will guide the work. Boundaries help us decide not only what we will do, but also what we will not do. They protect people, keep the work within appropriate limits, and help us remain faithful to what matters most.

Discernment—Alignment with God

We have been praying and listening throughout this first part. Before moving from direction into priorities and goals, we pause once more to ask:

Is this direction consistent with what God has entrusted to us?

This is not the first time we have sought Him, and it will not be the last. It is an intentional check-in before we move forward. If prayer, Scripture, wise counsel, or circumstances raise a concern, this is the time to slow down and listen again. We want to understand what God is doing and respond in a way that reflects His heart, timing, and purposes.

Practical Examples: From Direction to Action

The following examples show how a larger direction can begin shaping priorities, plans, and decisions.

A Family Example

Denise and I developed a vision for our children around the Great Commandments. We wanted Elise and Jonathan to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and to grow in excellence and love in their relationships.

That direction influenced many practical choices, including personal and family devotions, biographies, service, missions, ministry training, teachable moments, home education, and the example we tried to set. We paid attention to how our children were growing and adjusted what we did over time, but the larger direction remained clear.

An Organizational Example

At Colorado Springs Utilities, our vision was:

Colorado Springs Utilities is a treasured community partner, well known for providing responsible and dependable services that are vital to the future of our region.

We translated that direction into three areas of focus: rates, reliability, and relationships. Our goal was to perform in the top quartile in reliability and relationships while remaining in the bottom quartile in cost.

More than thirty measures helped us understand our progress. Each year, we chose initiatives intended to improve performance in those areas, and responsibility for the work became part of individual performance plans. The senior leadership team reviewed progress monthly. That kept the work visible and allowed us to address problems while there was still time to respond.

Conditions changed, and some methods, or even priorities, had to change with them. But the larger direction usually remained steady.

Part Two: Choose Priorities

Do not try to do everything. Focus on the few things that matter most.

- Identify three to five priorities.

- Choose what will make the greatest difference.
- Connect each priority to the agreed-upon direction.
- Decide what needs attention now and what can wait.

A priority represents a choice. If everything is a priority, nothing truly is.

Part Three: Build SMART Goals

Once priorities have been chosen, translate each one into a SMART goal.

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Time-bound

Use this simple form:

By [date], we will [action], measured by [success measure], so that [desired result].

Not every important result can be reduced to a number. Trust, maturity, and the health of a culture may also require observation and honest conversation. The purpose of a success measure is to help people recognize whether the goal has been accomplished.

Part Four: Build Action Plans

Break each goal into the specific steps or tasks required to complete it.

For each goal:

- Name the specific steps or tasks.
- Assign an owner to each one.

- Establish a completion date.
- Define the success measure.
- Identify any resources or decisions that will be needed.

Whenever possible, one person should own each step or task. Others may contribute, but the responsibility should be clear. Consider the sequence as well. Some steps cannot begin until earlier work has been completed.

Part Five: Review Progress Regularly and Adjust as Needed

What gets reviewed is far more likely to get done. Begin the work once the direction and next steps are clear enough. Do not wait for a perfect plan.

Establish a review rhythm that fits the work:

- Weekly: progress and immediate obstacles
- Monthly: results, responsibilities, and needed decisions
- Quarterly: overall effectiveness and larger adjustments

Not every effort needs all three. During each review, ask:

1. What has been completed?
2. What is falling behind?
3. What obstacle or decision needs attention?
4. What has changed?
5. What needs to happen next?

Review is not intended to become a search for blame. It keeps commitments visible, gives people an opportunity to ask for help, and allows obstacles to be addressed while there is still time to respond.

As the work proceeds:

- Celebrate progress.

- Address obstacles quickly.
- Adjust methods or priorities when circumstances change.
- Remain attentive to the larger direction.

Hold the direction firmly and the methods loosely. If circumstances have changed significantly or the assumptions behind the original plan prove wrong, wisdom may require returning to the beginning.

Key Leadership Reminders

- Vision without a practical way forward creates frustration.
- A few meaningful priorities are more useful than a long list.
- A goal is not yet an action plan.
- Responsibility needs to be clearly owned.
- Regular review keeps commitments from disappearing beneath daily demands.
- Adjustment is part of faithful stewardship.
- Prayer belongs at the beginning and throughout the work.

Summary

These principles offer a focused and repeatable way to move from vision to faithful execution. Like Nehemiah, we are invited to begin in prayer, see the situation honestly, secure what is needed, involve the right people, and remain close to the work.

We cannot control every outcome. Faithful execution does not mean that every plan will succeed exactly as intended. It means we listen carefully, plan responsibly, act with integrity, keep our commitments, and remain willing to learn.

When we establish direction, choose priorities, build SMART goals and action plans, and review the work, something that once felt overwhelming can begin moving one faithful step at a time.

Companion Resources

Building a Shared Foundation for Purpose and Direction provides the work that comes before this resource by helping a group develop clear language for its purpose, vision, mission, values, and leadership commitments.

Building a Culture That Lives Its Values carries the process into culture, showing how stated values become everyday decisions, relationships, systems, and accountability.

Leading Through Uncertainty offers a real example of this process in practice during the economic uncertainty of 2009. Speaking with our leaders, I reviewed specific results, priorities, measures, and initiatives; identified the officers accountable for key work; and described how we would track changing conditions and adjust our plans as the year unfolded.

Appendix A: A Real Example of Strengthening Staffing Systems

This example grew out of actual work with a church leadership team. The church's name has been omitted, but the priorities, goal dates, and planning sequence have been retained. It presents the direction, priorities, and goals for the initiative, then follows the first goal into a more detailed action plan.

The Initiative

We wanted clear and dependable ways to hire, onboard, evaluate, develop, and transition staff. We also needed appropriate pathways for appointing and releasing overseers, pastors, elders, and ministry heads. Our aim was to care for people well, strengthen trust, and make decisions consistently.

Part One: Set Direction

Who should be involved?

The roles were identified this way:

- Coordinating owner: Executive Pastor
- Decision-makers: Senior leadership team and elders or overseers

- Contributors: HR or administrative leaders and key ministry leaders
- Advisers: Trusted people with relevant experience

Clarifying these responsibilities helped distinguish who would coordinate the work, who would contribute, and who had authority to approve the final processes.

Where are we going?

We wanted staffing systems people could understand and trust, with defined practices for hiring, onboarding, evaluation, development, appointments, and transitions.

Why are we going there?

Inconsistent practices had created confusion, mistrust, and the possibility of unnecessary harm. Better-defined processes would help protect people, strengthen confidence in leadership, and support healthier transitions.

What does success look like?

Success would include:

- Approved processes for hiring and onboarding.
- Clear pathways for appointing overseers, pastors, elders, and ministry heads.
- An evaluation and development process ready for consistent use.
- Defined procedures for staff and leadership transitions.
- Leaders who understood their responsibilities and decision authority.
- Fewer reactive decisions and less confusion about what should happen next.

Success measures would include approved documents, completed checklists, consistent use in future cases, and structured feedback from the people involved.

What are our current realities?

The church had committed leaders, a strong relational foundation, and a clear sense of calling. At the same time, several personnel practices had not been clearly defined. This contributed to inconsistency in decision-making, communication, and follow-through.

Leaders also recognized the need to develop future leaders more intentionally. These concerns created an opportunity to build greater trust and prepare for future growth, but relational strain and a wider distrust of leadership meant the work needed to be carried carefully.

Which boundaries are needed?

- Treat every person with dignity and care.
- Communicate honestly and at the appropriate time while preserving necessary confidentiality.
- Provide due process and avoid rushed decisions.
- Make decisions through the proper leadership channels.
- Work within approved authority and available resources.
- Maintain legal and ethical compliance.
- Follow the approved processes unless there is a sound reason to adjust them.

Discernment—Alignment with God

Prayer and listening had accompanied the work from the beginning. Before choosing priorities, the team paused once more to ask whether the direction, timing, and proposed approach were consistent with what God had entrusted to them. After that pause, the team believed that pursuing greater order, trust, and stewardship of people was a faithful response.

Part Two: Choose Priorities

For this planning cycle, the team chose five priorities:

- Define and document the staff hiring process.

- Establish pathways for appointing overseers, pastors, elders, and ministry heads.
- Create a consistent onboarding process for new staff and leaders.
- Build an evaluation and development process.
- Establish appropriate transition and release pathways for staff and leaders.

Part Three: Build SMART Goals

Goal 1: By June 30, document and approve a standardized staff hiring process, measured by leadership approval and a completed workflow, checklist, and supporting materials, so that future hiring decisions can be handled consistently.

Goal 2: By August 1, document and approve the appointment process for overseers, pastors, elders, and ministry heads, measured by clearly defined steps, consultation, decision authority, and communication responsibilities, so that appointments can be made with clarity and appropriate shared leadership.

Goal 3: By September 15, complete and approve a structured onboarding process for new staff, measured by approved orientation materials and onboarding checklists ready for use with the next new staff member, so that people can enter their responsibilities with greater understanding and support.

Goal 4: By October 31, approve and prepare to launch a staff evaluation and development process, measured by completed review tools, an established schedule, and leaders prepared to conduct the first review cycle, so that development and accountability can become a regular part of the church's life.

Goal 5: By November 30, approve transition and release procedures for staff and key leadership roles, measured by documented responsibilities, decision steps, communication expectations, and protocols ready for the next applicable situation, so that changes can be handled with clarity and care.

Part Four: Build Action Plans

The following table carries Goal 1 into greater detail. The original plan established May 15 for the first draft and June 30 for the completed process. The remaining steps are shown in relation to those two milestones rather than assigning historical dates that were not retained. In a live plan, each intermediate step would also receive a specific completion date.

Goal 1: Create a standardized staff hiring process

Step or task	Owner	Timing or completion date	Success measure	Resources or decisions needed	Depends on
Draft the hiring workflow	Executive Pastor	May 15	A complete draft is ready for review.	Existing practices, policy requirements, and legal and ethical considerations	Clear direction and approved priority
Review the draft	Executive Pastor	After the first draft and before revision	Feedback is consolidated and unresolved decisions are identified.	Time for review and clarity about decision authority	Completed first draft
Revise the workflow	Executive Pastor	Following the review	Agreed-upon changes are incorporated.	Consolidated feedback and decisions from the review	Leadership review
Finalize and approve the process	Executive Pastor	June 30	The workflow, checklist, responsibilities, and supporting materials are complete and approved.	Final decisions and formal approval	Revised workflow
Prepare those responsible to use it	Executive Pastor or designee	Before the first post-launch hire	Those responsible understand their roles and have the required materials.	Final documents and time for orientation	Approved process
Implement the process	Hiring leader assigned to each opening	With every new hire after launch	Completed documentation shows that the approved process was followed.	Approved forms, checklists, and recordkeeping	Preparation of those responsible

Part Five: Review Progress Regularly and Adjust as Needed

The senior leadership team reviewed the initiative monthly. The person responsible for each goal reported:

1. What has been completed?
2. What is falling behind?

3. What obstacle or decision needs attention?
4. What conditions have changed?
5. What needs to happen next?

Decisions, revised dates, and next responsibilities were recorded in the action plan.

Each quarter, the team assessed whether the emerging systems were improving clarity and consistency and considered feedback from staff and ministry leaders. When no hiring, appointment, or transition had occurred during the review period, the team evaluated readiness rather than claiming a result that had not yet been tested.

Intended Outcome

The intended outcome was a staffing system that brought greater clarity to personnel decisions, cared for people appropriately, strengthened confidence in leadership, and supported healthy growth. It would give the church a dependable way to hire, appoint, develop, and transition people with clarity, care, and integrity.

Appendix B: Choosing the Right Level of Planning

Clarity When Needed, Speed When Possible

Not every effort requires the complete process. We need to recognize when deeper clarity is necessary and when it is appropriate to move more quickly into action. The purpose is not to add complexity. It is to apply the amount of thought the situation honestly requires.

When to Use the Complete Process

Use all five parts when direction, alignment, and shared understanding still need to be established. This is especially important when:

- The direction is not yet clear.
- Several people or teams are involved.

- There is significant potential for confusion or misalignment.
- The work will affect culture, systems, or people in meaningful ways.
- Broad ideas still need to become practical commitments.
- Similar efforts have been discussed before but have not been carried through.

Examples may include developing or revising staffing systems, beginning a new ministry or program, helping a culture grow in trust and accountability, navigating an important transition, or carrying work that affects many people or includes significant risk. In these situations, slowing down at the beginning can prevent confusion, unnecessary work, and avoidable harm later.

When to Use a Lighter Approach

Move more directly into SMART goals and action plans when the direction is already clear and the primary need is execution. This may be appropriate when:

- The objective is understood and agreed upon.
- The work takes place within an established process.
- The responsibility is contained and relatively simple.
- Only a few people are involved.
- There is little risk of confusion or misalignment.

Examples may include planning an event with an established purpose, completing a familiar project, improving a measurable result within an existing system, implementing an approved process, or managing personal or team responsibilities. In these situations, moving directly into clear goals, ownership, and action can keep the work from becoming unnecessarily complicated.

A Simple Decision Question

Is the direction clear and agreed upon?

- If not, use the complete process to establish direction and alignment.
- If so, move into SMART goals and action plans.

Common Pitfalls

Two patterns often undermine good work:

- Skipping the Set Direction part when it is needed, which creates confusion, misalignment, and repeated work.
- Using the complete process for a simple responsibility, which slows progress and adds unnecessary complexity.

Healthy stewardship requires knowing the difference.

One-Line Takeaway

Clarity when needed. Move quickly when possible.

Source Note

The Set Direction questions are adapted from Terry Cook's Lead, Develop, Care: Shaping a Different Kind of Leader and are used by permission.

The principle "Begin with the End in Mind" was popularized by Stephen R. Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

The SMART goal framework is commonly traced to George T. Doran's 1981 article, "There's a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives."

The family and Colorado Springs Utilities examples are drawn from my personal experience. The staffing-systems example in Appendix A came from actual work with a church leadership team. Identifying details have been omitted.

The account of Nehemiah is drawn from Nehemiah 1–6.

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