

From Vision to Faithful Execution

Practical Guidance for Turning Direction into Action

Introduction

Over the years, I have watched many worthwhile ideas lose momentum. People cared and worked hard, but no one had translated the vision into work that others could clearly understand and carry forward. In other situations, people moved quickly but later discovered that they had been working toward different outcomes.

Both problems are costly. Vision without a practical path often leads to frustration. Activity without sufficient direction can create more work rather than meaningful progress.

Nehemiah understood the importance of both prayer and planning. When he learned that Jerusalem's walls were broken and its gates had been burned, he did not rush immediately into action. He grieved, fasted, and prayed. Then he began thinking carefully about what would be required.

Before leaving for Jerusalem, Nehemiah secured permission and resources from the king. After arriving, he quietly examined the walls before announcing his plan. He organized the people, assigned responsibility, and stayed close enough to the work to respond when opposition arose. Fifty-two days later, the wall was complete.

Nehemiah began with a burden, but he did not confuse a burden with a plan.

That distinction has helped me many times. Prayer and planning belong together. We seek God before we move, but once the direction

becomes clear, we accept responsibility for developing a workable plan and following through.

This guide provides a practical way to do that:

*Set Direction Choose Priorities Define Goals Build the Plan
Establish Review Rhythms Execute and Adjust*

The framework can be used in an organization, a church, a family, or an individual project. The depth of the process should fit the work. A complicated initiative involving many people will require more thought than a familiar task with an agreed-upon outcome.

The purpose is not to make simple work complicated. It is to provide enough clarity for people to move forward with confidence.

1. Set Direction

Before deciding what to do, become clear about where you are going.

Many initiatives begin with a broad idea: strengthen the culture, develop leaders, improve communication, serve the community, or increase effectiveness. These may be worthwhile desires, but they are not yet clear enough to guide action.

Six questions can help establish direction:

Who should be involved?

Identify the person responsible for the outcome, those with authority to make decisions, and the people whose knowledge or participation will be needed. Doing this early prevents confusion later.

Where are we going?

Describe the desired outcome in language people can understand. If the direction cannot be stated simply, it may not yet be clear enough.

Why does this matter?

People are more likely to remain committed when they understand what is at stake. Explain why the work matters and why it deserves attention now.

What will success look like?

Describe what will be different when the work is complete. Whenever possible, define success in ways that can be seen or measured.

What is true today?

Look honestly at present conditions. What is working? Where are the gaps? What obstacles or opportunities need to be considered?

What boundaries will guide us?

Every initiative has limits. Time, available resources, values, legal requirements, and the agreed-upon scope all affect what can be done. Boundaries also help us decide what we will not do.

For a Christian, there is one more question beneath all the others: Is this direction consistent with what God has entrusted to us? We should be willing to adjust our plans when prayer, Scripture, wise counsel, or circumstances reveal that something is not yet right.

The questions in this section draw in part from Terry Cook's Lead, Develop, Care: Shaping a Different Kind of Leader.

Direction in Family Life

Denise and I used this kind of thinking when we considered what we most wanted for Elise and Jonathan. Our desire was grounded in the Great Commandments: that they would learn to love God wholeheartedly and extend that love to others.

That direction influenced many practical decisions. We made room for family devotions, service, missions, biographies, ministry experiences, and teachable moments. We adjusted our approach as the children grew, but the direction remained steady.

We could not control every outcome, nor did we want to determine their lives for them. Our responsibility was to remain clear about what we valued and create opportunities for those values to take root.

2. Choose Priorities

Once direction is established, decide what matters most.

Most organizations have more good ideas than they have time or resources to pursue. Trying to do everything usually spreads people thin and weakens the work that matters most.

Choose three to five priorities that will contribute most directly to the desired outcome. Ask which actions will make the greatest difference and which can wait. Some worthy ideas will need to be set aside so that the most important work receives sufficient attention.

Priorities are not simply a list of everything we care about. They represent choices.

3. Define Goals

Each priority should be translated into a clear goal.

The familiar SMART framework can be helpful. A useful goal is:

- Specific — clear about what will be accomplished
- Measurable — supported by evidence that shows whether progress is occurring
- Achievable — realistic in light of available authority and resources
- Relevant — connected directly to an agreed-upon priority
- Time-bound — attached to a meaningful completion date

A simple template is:

By [date], we will [action], measured by [evidence], in order to [desired result].

Not every meaningful outcome can be reduced to a number. Trust, maturity, and cultural health may require thoughtful observation as

well as measurable evidence. The goal is not to force everything into a statistic. It is to describe the desired result clearly enough that people will recognize whether progress is being made.

4. Build the Plan

A goal describes the result. An action plan identifies how the work will be done.

Break the goal into the few major steps needed to accomplish it. For each step, identify:

- the person responsible;
- the expected completion date;
- any resources or decisions needed; and
- the evidence that will show the step has been completed.

Ownership should be assigned to one person whenever possible. Others may contribute, but someone must know that the responsibility ultimately rests with them.

Before beginning, look at the sequence of the work. Some steps cannot begin until others are complete. A little thought at this stage can prevent delays and unnecessary rework later.

5. Establish Review Rhythms

In my experience, work that is reviewed regularly is far more likely to be completed.

The frequency of review should fit the initiative. A fast-moving project may need a brief weekly conversation. A longer effort may require monthly review, with a more thorough evaluation each quarter.

A useful review does not need to be lengthy. It should answer a few practical questions:

- What has been completed?
- Where are we falling behind?
- What obstacle needs to be addressed?

- Has anything changed that requires an adjustment?
- What needs to happen next?

Review is not intended to become a search for blame. It keeps commitments visible and gives leaders an opportunity to remove obstacles before they become larger problems.

6. Execute and Adjust

Eventually, the work must begin.

Do not wait for a perfect plan. Once the direction is sufficiently clear, responsibilities have been assigned, and the next steps are understood, move forward.

Execution requires steadiness. Celebrate progress, address problems when they arise, and remain attentive to what the work is revealing. Some methods will need to change. New information may require a different approach.

Adjusting the method is not the same as abandoning the direction. Good leaders know what must remain steady and what can be changed.

There are also times when the direction itself needs to be reconsidered. If circumstances have changed significantly or the original assumptions prove wrong, wisdom may require returning to the beginning. The framework is meant to support good judgment, not replace it.

A Closing Thought

The wall around Jerusalem was not rebuilt merely because Nehemiah cared deeply about it. His burden led him into prayer, and prayer helped prepare him to act. He clarified the work, secured what was needed, organized the people, and remained engaged until the wall was finished.

That has become an important reminder to me. We honor a worthwhile vision not only by believing in it, but by doing the patient work required to carry it through.

Faithful execution is seldom dramatic. More often, it is the result of clear direction, responsible people, and commitments that are kept over time.

Appendix A: A Real-World Example

Colorado Springs Utilities

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.

That vision mattered, but it needed to influence the way we operated.

1. Set Direction

We wanted to provide dependable utility services while remaining financially responsible and maintaining the trust of the community.

2. Choose Priorities

We concentrated on three strategic areas:

- Rates
- Reliability
- Relationships

These priorities helped us make decisions about where to direct attention and resources.

3. Define Goals

We established the goal of performing in the top quartile for reliability and relationships while remaining in the bottom quartile for cost.

More than thirty measures helped us understand how we were performing.

4. Build the Plan

Each year, we identified initiatives intended to improve results in the three priority areas. Responsibility for those initiatives was assigned, and expectations were included in individual performance plans.

5. Establish Review Rhythms

The senior leadership team reviewed progress monthly. This kept the measures visible and allowed us to address problems while there was still time to respond.

6. Execute and Adjust

Plans changed as conditions changed, but the larger direction remained steady. The combination of a clear vision, a few enduring priorities, and regular review helped translate broad aspirations into the daily work of the organization.

Appendix B: Nehemiah at a Glance

Nehemiah's leadership can be viewed through the same six movements:

Set Direction

He sought God, understood the condition of Jerusalem, and committed himself to rebuilding the wall.

Choose Priorities

He secured permission and resources, assessed the damage, organized the people, and prepared for opposition.

Define Goals

The immediate goal was clear: rebuild the wall so Jerusalem would no longer remain vulnerable and disgraced.

Build the Plan

Families and groups were assigned to specific sections. Responsibilities were visible, and people worked near their homes whenever possible.

Establish Review Rhythms

Nehemiah remained close to the work. He listened to concerns, addressed injustice within the community, and responded as threats emerged.

Execute and Adjust

When opposition increased, the people continued building while also preparing to defend the city. The method changed, but the work continued.

The wall was completed in fifty-two days. Even those who opposed the work “realized that this work had been done with the help of our God” (Nehemiah 6:16).

Appendix C: Practical Goals Tool

1. Set Direction

Who should be involved?

Where are we going?

Why does this matter?

What will success look like?

What is true today?

What boundaries will guide us?

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

2. Choose Priorities

Identify three to five priorities that will contribute most directly to the desired outcome.

Which priority deserves attention first?

3. Define Goals

Use this template:

By [date], we will [action], measured by [evidence], in order to [desired result].

Goal:

Completion date:

Evidence of progress or completion:

4. Build the Plan

For each major step, identify the owner, timing, and evidence of completion.

Step 1: _____

Owner: _____

Date: _____

Evidence: _____

Step 2: _____

Owner: _____

Date: _____

Evidence: _____

5. Establish Review Rhythms

How often will progress be reviewed?

Who will lead the review?

What information will be considered?

6. Execute and Adjust

What could interfere with progress?

How will we respond if it does?

What is the next step?

Intended Outcome

What will be different if this work is done well?

Appendix D: Choosing the Right Level of Planning

Not every responsibility requires the full process.

Use the Full Process When:

- The direction is not yet clear.
- Several people or groups must agree on the outcome.

- The initiative will significantly affect people or established systems.
- Similar efforts have stalled because responsibilities were unclear.

Use all six movements:

*Set Direction Choose Priorities Define Goals Build the Plan
Establish Review Rhythms Execute and Adjust*

Use a Lighter Approach When:

- The outcome is already clear and agreed upon.
- The work is familiar and relatively contained.
- Responsibility can be assigned without extensive discussion.

Begin with the goal and move directly into planning:

*Define Goals Build the Plan Establish Review Rhythms Execute
and Adjust*

A Simple Decision Question

Is the direction clear and agreed upon?

If it is not, take time to establish direction.

If it is, begin planning the work and move forward.

Source Note

The direction-setting questions draw in part from Terry Cook's Lead, Develop, Care: Shaping a Different Kind of Leader. The SMART-goals concept is commonly traced to George T. Doran, "There's a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives," Management Review 70, no. 11 (1981). The words represented by the letters have varied in later applications. The Colorado Springs Utilities material is included as a historical example drawn from Jerry's leadership experience and publicly available organizational information; it does not imply current organizational endorsement. Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.