Developing Effective and Competent Leaders
By Bob Young
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In November 2009, the Barna Group released the results of a study of leaders and leadership. While my primary interest is in spiritual leadership, general leadership principles and applications from other disciplines are frequently helpful in studying church leadership. The report observes, "Effective leaders are expected to possess a variety of skills that produce measurable results." Yet, many leaders struggle because the skills needed are lacking or have not been developed.

The study concluded that most leaders struggle when it comes to developing needed resources. This likely reflects the fact that many leaders have been trained in a model that assumes the existence of adequate resources with a focus on how to use existing resources to maximum advantage. An "adequate resources" model seldom addresses the challenge of resource identification and development in a context of scarcity.

The study evaluated leaders in fifteen core leadership competencies. The three competencies that leaders struggle with the most relate to developing tools and resources. Specifically, leaders are most likely to have difficulties (1) developing tangible resources (e.g., funds, personnel, facilities) which support their plans, (2) developing the skills of other leaders to facilitate performance, and (3) developing the systems required to complete tasks.

Specific actions that leaders most struggle with include (1) negotiating agreements that maximize results at minimal cost, (2) attracting new resources to the organization, especially human and financial resources, (3) developing and implementing individualized developmental plans for emerging leaders, and (4) nurturing robust relationships with existing colleagues, demonstrating sufficient care and attention to their needs.

The research discovered that leaders perceive themselves to be more effective in specific aspects of leadership than their performance suggests. One example of this faulty perception is in the area of organizational vision. While an overwhelming majority of leaders believes they are very effective at using the organization's vision to guide their decision-making, the study found that one of the greatest weaknesses of most leaders is failing to use the vision to protect the organization from over-commitment. George Barna explains, "Leaders tend to point to their vision as the reason to say 'yes' to opportunities. But our research showed that there is much less willingness to use the vision as a reason to say 'no' to opportunities that are not in the best interests of the organization."

Lessons from Master Leaders
Following the release of a new book on leadership (*Master Leaders*), Barna noted that research for the book underscored the challenge of some of these same issues. "Many of the master leaders concurred that if you are called by God to lead and you have the quality of character that motivates people to follow you, you can succeed because the competencies required can be learned," he commented. "Toward that end, it is invaluable to have one or more proven leaders who take you under their wing and systematically coach you in the kinds of skills you need."

Barna also discovered that a leader's attitude makes a big difference in his or her trajectory. "Potential leaders who are wise and have a deep commitment to using their leadership capacity to help other people are likely to grow into effectiveness. A potential leader who is smart and aggressive but fails to see leadership as serving, and is more worried about gaining credit and fame than doing what's right regardless of the personal cost, is in for a long, difficult journey."