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OCTOBER 2026 | MONTHLY LEADERSHIP NEWSLETTER

THE VASA LESSON

The Brutal Math of Leadership Momentum

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LEADERSHIP THOUGHT

Before increasing the weight of your vision, make sure your organization has the strength to carry it.

On August 10, 1628, thousands of spectators gathered along the waterfront in Stockholm to watch the maiden voyage of the Vasa.

It was supposed to be a moment of national triumph.

Commissioned by King Gustav II Adolf, the Vasa was designed to be one of the most powerful warships of its time. It carried 64 cannons, rose more than 50 meters from keel to the top of its main mast, and was covered with hundreds of elaborate sculptures. Years of work and enormous resources had gone into creating the ship.

Everything about the Vasa communicated power, ambition, and excellence.

Then she sailed.

The ship had traveled only about 1,300 meters when a gust of wind caused her to heel sharply to port. She recovered briefly, but another gust pushed her farther over. Water poured through the open gunports on the lower gun deck.

Within minutes, the Vasa was on the bottom of Stockholm harbor.

The striking part of the story is that the ship's fundamental weakness was not entirely unknown. A stability test before the maiden voyage had already demonstrated that the ship rolled dangerously. Yet the ship sailed anyway.

The problem was not that the Vasa lacked resources.

It had too much weight in the wrong places.

The ship's upper structure was too tall and heavily built for the relatively narrow hull beneath the waterline. Its center of gravity was too high, making it dangerously unstable. The very features designed to make the ship more powerful ultimately contributed to its inability to remain upright.

THE LEADERSHIP LESSON

Organizations can make the same mistake.

We often assume that organizational strength comes from adding more: more programs, more people, more initiatives, more technology, more communication, more goals, and more expectations.

But there is a point at which adding more to the top of an organization without strengthening what supports it creates instability rather than strength.

A leader can have an extraordinary vision and still lead an organization that cannot carry the weight of that vision.

A ministry can have tremendous opportunity but insufficient infrastructure. A university can launch innovative programs without developing the faculty, systems, culture, and resources necessary to sustain them. A business can pursue aggressive growth without building the organizational capacity required to support it.

The problem is not always a lack of ambition.

Sometimes the problem is misalignment between ambition and structure.

Research and management literature have repeatedly documented the difficulty organizations face when attempting major change. The larger leadership question is not simply why change is difficult, but why organizations with capable people, significant resources, and compelling strategies can still struggle to turn plans into sustained results.

I believe part of the answer can be illustrated by a simple leadership model:

L = P × M × D

LEVERAGE = POSITIONING × MESSAGE × DELIVERY

This is not intended as a mathematical law of organizational behavior. It is a leadership model—a way of thinking about why some organizations generate momentum while others struggle despite having talented people and significant resources.

The important feature of the model is the multiplication sign.

Leadership leverage is not simply additive. A leader cannot necessarily compensate for a serious weakness in one area by becoming exceptionally strong in another.

If the organization is positioned poorly, a great message may not be enough. If the message is unclear, excellent positioning may not produce alignment. If the organization cannot deliver, even a compelling vision may remain nothing more than a vision.

The three elements must work together.

1. POSITIONING

Are we structurally positioned to accomplish what we are attempting to accomplish?

Before launching another initiative, leaders should examine the foundation. Do we have the right people? Do we have the right systems? Do we have sufficient resources? Does our organizational structure support the strategy? Have we developed the culture necessary to sustain the change?

The Vasa reminds us that the foundation matters. The ship did not become unstable because it had too little ambition. It became unstable because the structure beneath the ambition could not adequately support the weight placed upon it.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

A ministry may have a compelling vision for growth, but if it does not have adequate staff, financial resources, administrative systems, or leadership capacity, the organization may be positioned poorly for that vision. The answer is not necessarily to abandon the vision. It may be to strengthen the foundation before attempting to carry the additional weight.

2. MESSAGE

Does everyone understand where we are going, why we are going there, and what their role is in getting there?

Leadership is not simply the ability to see the future. Leadership requires communicating that future in a way that people can understand, embrace, and act upon.

A leader may have a brilliant strategy, but if the people responsible for carrying it out cannot explain it, the organization does not have alignment—it has information.

There is a difference. Information tells people what is happening. A leadership message helps people understand why it matters and what they are expected to do about it.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Consider a pastor with exceptional vision and a remarkable ability to generate new ideas. He sees opportunities that others do not see and regularly develops innovative ways to move the ministry forward. Yet his staff struggles to understand what he wants, why the initiative matters, or how they are expected to execute it. The problem is not vision. It is communication. When a leader assumes that everyone sees what he sees, the organization can become frustrated and disconnected.

A leader's ability to see something does not mean the organization can see it.

3. DELIVERY

Can the organization actually execute what leadership has communicated?

This may be the most neglected question in leadership.

Organizations are often very good at announcing. They can create strategic plans, launch initiatives, establish committees, develop mission statements, conduct meetings, and communicate goals.

But leadership is ultimately demonstrated through execution.

The question is not merely, “What do we intend to do?” The more difficult question is, “Can we consistently deliver it?”

Vision without execution creates frustration. Strategy without implementation creates cynicism. Communication without follow-through creates organizational fatigue.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Imagine a nonprofit that develops an excellent strategic plan. The board approves it, the leadership team embraces it, and the organization communicates the new direction to its staff. Six months later, little has changed. No one established accountability measures, responsibilities remain unclear, and competing priorities continue to consume the organization's time. The strategy may not have been wrong. The organization simply lacked the systems and discipline required to deliver it.

BEFORE YOU ADD MORE WEIGHT

Perhaps the most important question a leader can ask before launching the next major initiative is not, “How much more can we accomplish?”

Instead, ask: “How much more can our organization sustainably carry?”

Those are two very different questions.

Growth is not automatically strength. Expansion is not automatically progress. Complexity is not automatically sophistication.

Sometimes the most important leadership decision is not adding another layer, another program, another responsibility, or another objective. Sometimes leadership means strengthening the foundation first.

The Vasa had extraordinary power. It had resources. It had craftsmanship. It had technology. It had vision. It had royal backing.

But it did not have the structural alignment necessary to carry the weight that had been placed upon it.

A QUESTION FOR LEADERS

Before your organization takes on its next major initiative, ask:

ARE WE ADDING WEIGHT — OR ARE WE INCREASING CAPACITY?

The answer may determine whether your next initiative creates momentum or instability.

CCI / SAILS COHORT OPPORTUNITY

BUILD YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

OCTOBER • NOVEMBER • DECEMBER 2026

EVERY 6TH PARTICIPANT IS FREE

For every six participants enrolled in a qualifying cohort, one participant receives the training at no cost. The organization can distribute that savings however it chooses.

Use the savings to reduce your organization's training expense, support another leadership development opportunity, apply it toward additional training, or share the benefit with your leadership team.

You do not have to build the cohort alone. Organizations can join together to form a cohort. A church can partner with another church. A nonprofit can partner with another nonprofit. Several smaller organizations can combine their leaders to reach the cohort size.

The goal is simple: get leaders in the room, learn together, and build stronger leadership capacity.

STRENGTHEN THE FOUNDATION

The Vasa reminds us that organizations cannot indefinitely increase the weight they carry without strengthening the structure beneath it. Leadership development is part of that foundation.

SAILS provides practical leadership training designed to equip pastors, ministry leaders, nonprofit leaders, business professionals, and emerging leaders with knowledge and skills they can apply immediately.

Every 6th participant is FREE.

Contact Christian Concepts Inc. to discuss forming a cohort or combining participants with another organization.

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