

launchpad::

A red rocket is shown in the upper left corner, launching upwards. A thick trail of dark smoke and white vapor follows its path down the left side of the frame. The background is a clear blue sky with scattered white clouds and a crescent moon visible in the upper right quadrant.

::six fundamentals of a start-up ministry

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launchpad:: six fundamentals of a start-up ministry

22 years in ministry! – Not a long time, but long enough that people are asking me, “Tom, I think God has called me to begin a ministry...how do I begin?” After some dialogue about their passion and vision, I share with them six fundamentals that I believe are necessary after God gives you the assignment. They have to lead themselves and others through each one of these if they are going to have a ministry of lasting value. I normally start explaining the six fundamentals with the following story:

In 1984, my wife and I had been married for 11 years, and we felt our two sons needed a week at summer camp. So, in mid-July we packed up the car and headed to Schroon Lake, New York, to the Word of Life Ranch. I had been a “rancher” in my younger days, and my grandparents used to take me to Camp of the Woods where I was roped into a bunk bed (so I wouldn’t fall out) many a night. I had a great experience there and especially loved the water, but my week as a “rancher” was not so good. It rained the whole week and our tent was set up right over what became a river as the rain cascaded down the mountainside on its way to the lake. In spite of these memories, my wife and I felt summer camp was going to be a good experience for our boys. (Hindsight is always 20/20.)



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To join in our boys' camp experience, my wife and I headed to Word of Life Island for a week of training to work with the teenagers in Word of Life Clubs. The camp had water, ski boats--all the things I love. Add in some teenagers and we were looking at a great time! There were no tents there and we were staying in the “White House” as it was named because of the history attached to it. It rained for a day and we enjoyed it. We knew the program because we had taken the youth group up to snow camp.

As I recall, it was late on Thursday when our world began to turn upside down for the second time. All together, there have been three times in my life when God has placed in my/our path pivotal intersections, places where I have had to make a life altering decision. I believe everyone at some stage on his or her journey has pivotal moments. But unfortunately, a lot of us miss or ignore them—for a number of reasons. First, we are not paying attention to the journey so we barrel through the intersection on the same old roadway without ever recognizing its significance. Second, we avoid turning at the intersection because we are afraid to make a change. The result is that we never allow God to mold us to be all He has planned for us to be. These pivotal moments are like a conversion. Someone or something allows us to think differently, and we are changed. Then a decision has to be made, and we must walk by faith even though we may not see the full picture at the time. The only way I know to take full advantage of these pivotal intersections is to: (1) make the turn mentally with a great attitude, (2) place one foot in front of the other, and (3) give 100% while turning onto the new road ahead. I'll use a baseball field as an illustration.

You and I stand at home plate, the ball of life is thrown to us, and we take a swing at it. After hitting the ball, we race off to first base where we stand safely and enjoy the view for a short period of time. Then, life challenges us to make a decision, and we have to choose between staying put or going to second base. If we don't move forward in the right direction, we are out. If we do move towards second base, which is a little more risky than staying at first, the

pressure is greater, the potential loss is larger, but the rewards can be a huge win. Oh yes, more passion is needed to get there, but we go for it, and we are called safe as we arrive.

The “honeymoon” period in the new ministry is exhilarating. We give our best and think this is what God had in mind for us all along. We think we have arrived. For some, this is where God wants them for a lifetime. For others it is almost a repeat of the same process. The circumstances of life are hit and everything around us is up in the air, and for a second it is confusing, but with more risk than ever (and remember this will be harder since there is always a shortstop on the way to third base) we have to make a life-altering decision to run by faith, not assured of what the outcome will be. So we run as straight and as fast as we can, with passion and determination and we arrive at third—safe! Wow, do we feel good! We are set up for a big win, we can see home, and we know what has to happen. We can jump the gun and be called out or we can wait too long and be called out – timing is everything. And yes, normally by this time it is late in the game and we are almost home...oh so close, but not quite there yet.

We have seen the count come down to the wire and one more time a pivotal moment arrives! We have a huge choice to make: we can run or we can stay. If we decide to stay, the game might be over before we get home. We have to make a quick decision and get moving, not

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knowing all the facts and not knowing if we will make it. However, we go for it and run harder than ever before because we want to arrive home safely, not only for ourselves, but for the team. We could have stopped at third but who are we to say we are out? Why should we call the game over? It is here where most people call themselves out. God is yelling, “OH NO, run – run - run one more time!”

first:: RUN – until God says you’re out!

This is what happened to my wife and I on the Island that day. Paul Bubar entered our lives and showed us that the ball was in the air and it was up to us to start running on a whole new field...the fulltime ministry field. Paul got us to see that God was opening up a new ballgame for us to “play” and who were we to call an out before God was done with us. He told us the above story and I have used it hundreds of times as I have sat with people who, because of history, thought they were “normal.” God placed on my heart, as Paul did, that there is something more significant here for them to do. Why are you calling the game over? Give it all you have. This started a wonderful journey for my wife and me. It moved us, we turned a corner that day, and it was a pivotal moment in our lives. We came to the Island going in one direction and left knowing we were to go in another. And yes, we were scared to death!

second:: FUND – and run, they go together!

I had been working with my father for 18 years and was now going to leave the “business world” for the “ministry world.” Not only did I have to share this news with him, but I also had to deal with the bigger issue of leaving the security of a regular paycheck and great benefits to begin taking responsibility for raising my own funds. This was a whole new ball game for me, but I did not let circumstances intimidate me. I ran with God's blessing.

As I began the process of running in this “ministry world,” I learned very quickly that there were three basic ways to raise money. First, just go for it - present the need and request a response.

This worked because we had a story to tell. After telling the story, we received a check and were on to the next stop! After a while I began to feel uneasy and had no idea why. I checked to be sure what I was saying and doing was legally, morally, and ethically right, but something still felt wrong. The checks were coming in, however, I knew I did not want to be a fundraiser. God had not called me to that - but I had to do ministry, so I had to raise money. One day, I was met by a wonderful and humble elderly lady after church, and she had great words of encouragement for my wife's singing and said how cute our boys were. However, not much was mentioned about my talk. She then went on to say, "In non-profit work you will never have enough money; you will always be raising funds." After she left, I said to myself, "No way - I will not do that." Now, she was partly right; I have from 1984 to this day needed funds to carry out my ministry. However, her comment changed my heart and then my process. Just to be straight up on this point, we did raise a lot of money this way and so can you. But from where I sit it is not biblical.

The second way to raise funds is to create a need, even if one is not there. A person in a large ministry once told me to do some rethinking on the ways of raising funds. I sat down with this man, who, by the way, was successful in raising a lot of money for his ministry. He said to me, "Tom, you need to have a crisis each month and when you do, you will raise a lot of money. I can help you develop what this should look like." He went on to give me a list of his clients who raised funds in this way. I was not at all comfortable with this conversation or his idea of funding and decided that it was not a biblical way to raise needed funds.



Philippians 4:17 –
“Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account.”

Not long after that I had a conversation with another man. It was out of this conversation that I realized the third way to raise funds. He was a humble man and had helped Theodore Epp develop his funding. He gave me a few verses of Scripture to review and then said, "Tom, meditate on this one verse if nothing else: Philippians 4:17 – "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account." What stuck in my mind more than anything else was the last part of the verse, "but I am looking for what may be credited to your account." It struck me that if that is true, then it changes everything! Here is the list I came up with that radically changed not only my way of thinking but also me:

- I need to move from me to we.
- I need to move from what I need to what you need.
- If I developed an abundance mindset, then God would help me with what I needed for the ministry in which He has called me.
- I came to realize that in my daily walk, God says that I need to add to others' accounts and stop looking for my own gift.
- It is a stewardship issue.
- At its core, it is a heart issue.
- I was to help build the body - taking the giver to new heights.

This is not the fastest way to raise necessary funds, but it is biblical. Yes, it does cost you money and time...and thus it is deeply rewarding. It was interesting to see that within a few short months after I implemented this way of funding, we were totally funded and with a surplus—and have always remained there. My wife and I have never lacked anything we have needed.

This method developed into what later became known as relational funding. Over the years, I have become more convinced that this is the only biblical model for all ministries and believers to use, whether you are in vocational ministry or not. (One of the best resources today on relational funding has been written by the Senior Vice President of EQUIP, Doug Carter. Look for his eBooks([link](#)) or sign up to receive a copy of Dr. Carter's booklet by going to www.iEQUIP.org. On the website, you'll find a diagram of the relational funding model, and the focus and results of this Biblical mindset.)

Since those simple days back in 1984 and 1985, I have seen relational funding lived out. About 4 years ago I met a successful young businessman with a wonderful family who had the ability to give away large sums of money. As we talked, he told me about his family and his business and was hoping we would connect. I had a large matching gift fund that I needed to raise finances for and time was running out fast. We connected and today we are great friends. I never received a penny from him or his business, but after sharing with him about a ministry that fit his passion, he partnered with another ministry (not mine) in a huge way. Providentially, a few days later our matching fund was complete!

Let me also tell you about a wonderful Christian who stopped by my office. He owned a radio station in the same town where I managed a station. For 7 years or so he leased this station to another Christian radio network – considered by some to be our competition. He told me he was unhappy with the current tenants and did not want to lease the station to them again. We talked on and off for the next few weeks and each time I became more and more uneasy. Back at the first meeting I asked him if he had talked with the current tenants, and I was never given a straight reply. One morning, I decided to call one of the tenants, and told him of the situation. I told the owner of the station what I had done and connected him with the tenant for a talk. In the end, they retained their lease and I felt good knowing that I had done the right thing. I must admit though, it would have been nice to have that lease!

I could give you story after story like these - each exemplifying the biblical model of relationships. Value their God-given passion, help them fulfill it, pour into their lives with books, notes, and other resources, and God will do the rest.

On the other side, I can give many illustrations of people and ministries that have a self-focused funding model that says, "It is all about me," or which seeks to employ guilt as a tactic in raising money. The bottom line of raising funds is to make sure that three major facts are not lacking:

- 1) A real friendship and desire to help that friend be all God created them to be.
- 2) The privilege of multiplying yourself.
- 3) The opportunity to leave a positive legacy.

By the way – relational funding is for both profit and non-profit ministries.

third:: BE REAL – not a copy machine!

As soon as word got out that there was a new kid on the block working with the youth of New Jersey, New York City, Long Island and Eastern Pennsylvania, suddenly everyone seemed to have God's plan for the resources my ministry needed to succeed. To make the situation worse, I already had a kit that addressed the needs of every church's youth!

I would say, as I went to meet with the pastors, you need this and this is why and to be honest, some churches needed the kit. It was easy—give me 6 leaders to train, and I will give you events and a process and you will have instant youth success. However, there were a number of things I did not realize at first when approaching churches with the kit.

1. *Not every church was at the same spiritual level. As these 6 lay-leaders would develop in their relationship with Jesus Christ, they grew out of the walls of the kit – they wanted to take the core and run with it. This is when that new abundance mentality came into reality for me. The good news is we went from 18 groups to 65 in two years. We learned to just let people grow and develop with no lid.*
2. *Not every church needed a kit – some churches had great leaders who were doing a great work for God with their youth. The fact is they could have taught us a few things.*
3. *By spending time with the youth leaders and finding out their gift sets and passions, I could then partner them with their gift set and passion.*
4. *It was during this time that I learned the differences between a secure pastor and an insecure pastor.*
5. *This is when I also became very convicted that events have their place, however, the difference maker is the process. I have way too many examples of youth who made a decision at an event, never got involved in the process, and they are nowhere to be found today. I have examples of youth that had proven talent, won awards, but had no process to take them on the journey.*
6. *Even though the material was solid Biblical doctrine, the box that surrounded it was thick and high and only a few could get in. Here is where I get into trouble. I am not saying you should give up on the doctrine; just keep the walls down in order to let in many. If someone wants to learn and take the journey, but comes from a different background and thinking, don't keep them from getting in on the journey.*

You see copy machines are mindless. They just copy – copy – copy the original. Same – same – same. God made His church and each individual to be special and one of kind, so that we can reach our sphere of influence in a way that uses our personality and our ministry's DNA to their full advantage.

Copy machines do not have an option – they just do the deal. People have a mind and have to be good stewards of that mind, so why not let them think it through with you? Why not find out what their passion is and see if there can be a partnership. Partnership is far better than salesmanship!

fourth:: EXCELLENCE – start off your ministry with excellence!

There is no excuse for mediocrity in ministry! None! Money and funding have been an excuse for mediocrity, but that time period is long over. Excellence is a must! First, excellence in your relationship with God is primary. You cannot underestimate the “God factor” in your life. He will guide you to the degree you abide in Christ. How do you cultivate the “God factor?”

1. Live in the Word
2. Live in Prayer
3. Be part of a fellowship of believers
4. Be a witness to the world 24/7

The “God factor” is vital to a ministry of excellence. Here are 5 things to consider as you spend time with God that will help you to become a person of excellence:

1. Ask God to open your eyes with a new freshness.
2. Separate yourself from the “full-time” part of your life to become a single person loved by God and ready to meet Him personally.
3. As you seek God, remember it is not about your commitment – it is about trust, so ask Him to build your trust in Him.
4. Pray in faith and ask God to extend your faith.
5. Ask God for wisdom on whom to mentor to take the journey with you.

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Excellence in your personal life and every area of ministry is essential for success in every area of life. Excellence is one of those overworked words that mean something different to everyone. To me, excellence is doing my very best, my 101%, with what God has given to me. That means I might not have a lot of money for printing materials but what I do print will be done with excellence. It also means looking our best. Why is that?

Many times people cannot get past your look to hear your heart. Get in or stay in style and present yourself well. Take a class, read a book, do whatever you have to do to stay up with the “look” of the day. Excellence also means to represent your talk or ministry very well. Study others and how they represent their ministry. Take some time to meet and talk with business salespeople and learn from them. In effect you are “selling” yourself and your ministry to others every time you open your mouth or represent yourself as an ambassador for your ministry.

fifth:: WORK – hard!

If you are going to run the race God has played out for you it will take hard work. Work to overcome stereotypes, work to keep yourself relevant, work so you can grow in your leadership, work in relationships, and work at being excellent in all you do. It will take a lot of work just to think of new and better ways to do what you need to do. Be sure to work on the following areas:

1. **Yourself** (*making yourself better in all areas of your life*)
2. **Your motivation** (*what breaks you motivates you*)
3. **Your self regulations** (*how you govern yourself*)
4. **Your empathy for others** (*some of us are great on the platform, but not one-on-one, or vice versa*)
5. **Adapt to relationships** (*this includes family, friends, ministry co-workers, and others in your sphere of influence*)

You must keep these 5 areas at the top of your mind daily, or you'll place a lid on your level of influence. Let me put it this way. I believe deeply that there is a direct link between your personal development as a leader and organizational effectiveness. If you are going to get the job done, accomplish what God has intended for you to accomplish, and become one of God's high performers, then you have to possess a mentality of continuous improvement. This will keep you fresh, relevant and growing. Jim Collins in *Good to Great* put it this way, “The difference between good and great is the quality of the leader.”

This is not always easy to do—to change and build a habit of self-examination—but it is a must if you are going to move forward.

sixth:: VOLUNTEERS – use them!

You cannot do ministry without volunteers! Partnering with volunteers is a book in and of itself, but I'll briefly give you cliff notes for doing so effectively. I would say that volunteers fall into two categories: prayer partners and laborers. First, ask the Lord to give you as many prayer partners as He can. There is a large group of people in your church and sphere of influence that would love to pray for you daily as God brings you to their mind. As you build relationships with people ask them to join your prayer team. Once they say yes, then here is what you should do for them:

1. Treat them like royalty – they are!
2. Send them weekly or biweekly prayer requests via email.
3. Send them special updates on answered prayer.
4. Make them part of your inner circle.
5. Let them know what you are thinking and let them be a part of the process.
6. Make it easy for them to get off the prayer team – life moves on and not all can continue as a prayer partner.
7. Build on this relationship: invite them to a prayer seminar, have a special time for them to come and meet the team, value them.

When I was asked to turn a ministry around in 1999, the very first thing I put into place was a prayer team. It gave me so much in return. Even though I cannot prove it – I'm confident the prayer team gave us the wins we needed to go higher. In just the first year, I had over 1,000 praying daily as God brought us to their minds—it was awesome and humbling. In 5 years, we had over 6,000 prayer partners!

The second group of volunteers might include laborers who are also willing to be the hands and feet of your ministry. They are the ones who give of their time so that you don't have to hire someone else to do them. Volunteers are invaluable and should be prized for their contribution. In fact, there should be only one difference between volunteers and the "paid" team members—the form in which they get paid!



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Believe me, I know that starting a fresh new ministry is exciting and frightening; the range of emotions run to and fro, from one spectrum to the other. However, when God is in it and you stay laser-focused on these six fundamentals – and lead yourself and others through the process that gives your ministry a solid foundation – you will enjoy the rest of the journey a whole lot more.



Rev. Tom Atema is the VP of International Ministries and Strategic Partnership with EQUIP. For more information about EQUIP or to invite Tom or another EQUIP speaker to your event, go to www.iEQUIP.org.