

# LEADING YOUR MINISTRY HIGHER

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*Tom Atema, VP of International Ministries, EQUIP*

March 1, 1999—the first day of one of the most exciting, challenging adventures of my life! The journey started back in 1948.

I grew up in a unique Christian environment. My dad's background was Dutch Christian Reformed and my mom was an Independent Baptist, better known in New Jersey back then as a Conservative Baptist.

In my younger years my dad owned his own business, which started as a home-to-home milk delivery business and grew so that he could and did retire at age 55. Dad worked very hard in the business environment as well as in the church environment, and worked very hard for the Lord. My parents were one of 4 couples that started Wyckoff Baptist Church. Dad was 74 years young when he helped start another church - Emmanuel Bible.

If you ever wanted to have lively discussions with my dad, you just had to ask him about ministry work, specifically the topic of the differences between the church world and the business world. One of my dad's core beliefs was there was only one difference between these two worlds—*discipline*. He would get so irritated when the church showed no discipline. When the church made a bad decision, financial or otherwise, in Dad's mind, it always came back to a discipline issue. "If the church would be more disciplined it could do so much more." If I heard that once, I heard it ten thousand times. My dad would mentor young business people (he was mentoring two when he died at age 81). He would also help them financially. He would help anyone who showed passion and discipline. In turn, he would never give a penny to any one who had no discipline. Talk with them—yes, pray for them—yes, but give them money to help them restart or dig out of a financial hole...never, regardless if they were individuals or ministries!

It was this and other core beliefs of my dad's that were transferred to me. The transfer of these values was not always smooth and I did not realize until many years later that I had gained many of his values. As I look back, it is this one core belief, discipline, which has shaped why I do what I do. As God has given me assignments, they have all been in two areas: new start-up ministries and helping established ministries get back on track or go to the next level. All along it has been this core value of discipline that has been the overriding theme of whatever I have done or am doing.

Let's skip ahead to January of 1999, the day my wife and I moved into our new home in North Carolina. Both of our boys had left home and were on their own so we were enjoying the "empty nest." We decided to downsize and move closer to where I was ministering, the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove in Asheville, NC. I had been serving there for 5 years and because of the conference schedule, moving across the street from The Cove was going to give me more options. Little did I know that morning that in a few months I would be back to a 20-minute drive to my assignment! You see, my new assignment was to direct the ministry of Blue Ridge Broadcasting, which was started by Dr. and Mrs. Billy Graham in 1962. Blue Ridge Broadcasting is a Christian radio station used to encourage and reach people with the Gospel message.

From 1962 to 1999, Blue Ridge Broadcasting grew to two radio stations: WFGW AM & WMIT FM. The ministry was meeting the needs of many people in the region they served; however, they were not reaching their full potential. As I began this assignment, within the first hours of the day, there were four initial facts that I took into consideration:

1. The staff was made up of good people who had a heart for God.
2. The ministry paid ministry wages.
3. There was an audience of roughly 98,000 per week on WMIT. (Accurate figures were hard to come by.)
4. The ministry was at a standstill—the budget had not grown more than a few thousand per year and the audience had only increased by a few thousand in number.

I remember praying that afternoon on what became a daily walk to the end of the property and back, "God, I need your wisdom, help me to ask the right questions and lead appropriately."

As I look back over those years, I have come to believe more deeply that there are six crucial disciplines to growing a ministry. These disciplines are at the core of the matter of growth and can also be used to turn ministries around.

#### **DISCIPLINE #1 - ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.**

*"It's not the answers that guide life's journey, but rather the questions."*

- Rainer Rilke

There are two questions that I asked God on a daily basis. The first was, "God, what in the world are you doing?" That is still something I ask today and have yet to receive the complete answer! There will be moments when God will give you a small glimpse of what He has

in mind. I have experienced and realized over and over again that God's ways are not only different from ours, they are far greater!

The second question I asked God daily was, "What would be the bottom line or the ultimate outcome of Christian radio from your perspective?" This was vital to me because this answer leads to vision—what we see as the end result of our mission drives how and what we do to accomplish that vision. One day, while I was reading scripture, I came to realize that the ultimate purpose of Christian radio is to encourage the body of Christ in helping each member see how exciting it is to be involved in what God is doing and how much richer life can be each day. Simply put, inviting them to be part of what He is doing around the world and allow them to participate in a balanced environment of fun, music and teaching. This answer to the right question led us to focus on our vision at Blue Ridge Broadcasting.

## **DISCIPLINE # 2 - KEEP THE VISION AND MISSION IN FRONT OF PEOPLE DAILY.**

*"The purpose of Blue Ridge Broadcasting is to lead as many people as possible into a personal and dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. We do this specifically to the 40-year-old single female with two children at home who is a lukewarm Christian."*

*-Vision of Blue Ridge Broadcasting*

I then began to deliver this vision and mission everywhere; in our prayer time, in print, at the front desk, on the walls, in staff meetings and in public settings—everywhere I went. I took time on the radio to go over the vision and mission and wanted them to not only be "hearers but doers" and put the "why" behind it. This led to a lot of discussion and of course, some controversy. As we slowly walked through this delivery, it became a key juncture in the journey.

## **DISCIPLINE # 3 - WHO IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT:**

*"Do right -do right no matter what happens, no matter what it costs. Do right—it will always be the right thing to do." -T.W. Wilson*

As the vision and mission became clearer on a daily basis, staff members realized the train was leaving the station and rapidly picking up speed. The momentum of this was in no small part due to the fact that we had started a daily prayer team. At this stage, as God brought us to their minds, we had over 1,000 people praying for us daily. We cannot underestimate the importance of prayer.

My wife and I have three grandsons and, as you know, most battery-operated toys don't come with the batteries! So needless to say,

when they come to visit we go through many batteries. However, this is not so with God—batteries are included. God gives us the personal energy and resources to do what He has called us to do. Prayer is the activator.

With this strong and intense prayer life, as we moved from a staff to a team, I had to come to the very painful realization that not all the people who had been faithful to the ministry for so many years were willing to take the journey with me. I cannot begin to tell you how difficult this realization was for me. Let me share with you why. Everyone had the ability and skills to go on the journey, but some lacked the desire. Everyone loved the Lord and everyone loved the ministry, but they had work to do and this was hard.

I had to come to a place and had to be honest with myself and ask “WHO”, not “what”. You see, the mistake many ministries make is they answer the “what” first: *What does this person need to do and what can be accomplished?* This is the wrong question because it deals with a manufactured outcome. I believe ministries have to deal with the “WHO” first to receive a genuine vision-driven outcome: *Who has the heart and who is the best to deliver an outcome?* When this is in place, then the “what” follows and you have a team working and ministering in their sweet spot and they enjoy it. The people around them enjoy it and the culture around them develops into a “we work hard, but we have fun” culture. All but three people left the ministry over a three-year period but the end result was the right team!

After we have the “WHO” (the right people) then it is our privilege and responsibility to value them. This is huge! We must add value to our team, both in the work and family environment. Just saying thanks is big. Everyone on our team needs to be a Christ-like servant on every level. However, where the rubber meets the road is their paycheck. For the most part, ministries “use, abuse, and throw away” the most vital resources they have—team members. You’ve heard it as I have, “You’re working for God and for the eternal....” That does not hold up Biblically; it just shows no discipline.

What I had to do at Blue Ridge Broadcasting once we had the right people was to pay them general market radio pay. Why not? I expected results just like the general market. I expected 100% of their passion, talents, and gifts—100% of the time. Wherever God has placed me, it has been my mission to raise the pay of the staff. Where I was in total control, I would raise it slightly higher than the counter parts that were not in ministry. Every time I did that the money came in to fund it. Some we had to help in other ways because of family issues, others we had to give extra time off. The important thing was to do what was right, value the people.

Yes, we work hard but we also have fun on the journey. As I see it, there should be a big difference between the ministry workplace and the secular workplace – we should be adding more value. Expressing value to our most vital resources, our team members, is a discipline we should all embrace.

#### **DISCIPLINE # 4 - KEEP THE MINISTRY OPEN:**

*“Not everyone is at the same point in their spiritual journey – celebrate where they are!”*

As Christians, we are taught in Scripture to grow and to become more like Christ. To top it off, we are to grow daily, not weekly or monthly or yearly, but daily. So, at the end of today as you and I look back, are we more like Christ at 5pm than we were at 8am? Allow me to illustrate this. If we could place an extension ladder at our feet and put the top of it at the foot stool of God the Father, we are to climb that ladder one rung at a time every day, moving up the ladder and becoming more like Christ as we move closer to Him. This is a Biblical truth and it is one of those “musts” in our lives.

Here is the caution—as we climb closer to Christ and become more like Him, our ministries do the same. As we go higher our tendency is to make the point of entrance the level where we are, no matter where someone is on the journey. We have to fight this and it requires discipline. The ministry must keep itself open and ready to accept people where they are on the journey.

This is a huge discipline—don’t miss it! One of the challenges I faced daily at Blue Ridge Broadcasting was the fact that we were gaining momentum. By 2005, we had an audience of 345,000 weekly, up from 98,000 in 1999, and our budget escalated from \$745,000 in 1999 to \$2.5 million in 2005. We had grown, moving up rung by rung on the ladder, and as we grew it became more and more difficult to see and find our own entry point. But I had to keep the ministry at a place where everyone could enter at the level they were on. But how?

It came back to our vision and mission. Our entrance to a dynamic relationship with the church was first and foremost evangelism. We did a lot of this, not only because we were part of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, but also because we were a team of Christians and we were delighted to share our faith. Discipleship came next. Not only did we have the best teachers in the US on the radio, we also brought them into the area for special events. We partnered with local churches and other ministries to build up the believers, getting them connected. The last key area was missions. We held a lot of mission drives—collecting CD’s for third-world radio stations, eyeglasses and Bibles for missionaries to use when teaching English, and a whole lot more. In addition to the projects,

we also held fundraisers four or five times a year. We held a live “What’s Up” mission event going around the world talking to different short-term and career missionaries for a week.

Why? To give everyone the opportunity to join in, to be part of what God was doing at their level. The result of all of this was that the audience not only grew in numbers but more importantly they grew and moved from the point they were at to higher ground spiritually. We allowed them to enter on their rung of the ladder and pushed them to move up closer to Christ.

In my opinion, this is what gave us the continuing growth and huge momentum. All around us were people who said our audience would stop growing and our income would level off. I disagreed then and I still do! The unsaved and unconnected Christian population of the world is huge and growing much larger than our audience was growing. The key is allowing everyone who wants to experience a dynamic relationship to have one, to join in on their level, to come in at their personal point of entry. If we keep the entry level low and uncomplicated, then our ministries will grow and will continue to do so at a rapid rate.

I know some are saying right now, “You are into numbers.” I have heard that for years and to be honest, I have helped that by demanding we measure everything—I mean everything. But I am not into numbers. Numbers help us evaluate our part, the entry point of others, into His work. God gives the increase when we just let others join Him in what He is already doing.

### **DISCIPLINE # 5 - REALIZE THAT YOU ARE ACCOUNTABLE, NOT RESPONSIBLE!**

*“God calls us to do our part, then and only then will He do his part!”*

My Dad said this a lot. I am not sure who originally said it, but let me put it another way—I am accountable and God is responsible. When God gives us an assignment, we are accountable to lead with excellence and we are to represent Him in all we do. In order for us to do this we need to have some disciplines learned. One of the disciplines that get many into trouble is the area of finances.

After coming out of the business world, I soon realized that in a lot of areas there was a disconnection between the business world and the church world. To be honest, the church would say one thing and do another. One of those areas that just drive me crazy is in the area of tithing. The church and ministries preach this as a starting point for our giving back to God. How many times have I heard, “Tom, would you give over and above your tithe to...Tom, from your business would you tithe...the Bible teaches to give and it will be given back to you...” and on and on. Even though I am ordained as a

reverend and have studied the Bible and heard thousands of wonderful sermons and teachings from the best of the best, I have yet to find anyone who says tithes and offerings are for everyone except churches and Para church ministries. Yes, Malachi 3:10 says, “Bring the whole tithe into the store house.” So you say, “See—bring it to the church”. However, I would say, but not die for the idea, that even the church is to give at least 10% (as a starting point) away as a gift back to God.

It was this philosophy that drove us at Blue Ridge Broadcasting to give more than 10% to others, to have an abundance mindset instead of a scarcity mindset. So we started a radio ministry in partnership with another ministry to reach the Arabic world for Christ. This first started by sending them funds to buy a building, a satellite service, create Internet chat rooms and much more. It drove us to train pastors in the Middle East and in the Persian World, to start leadership training in China, to sponsor children with Compassion, Bibles with Book Link and many more ministries outside of our parent ministry. In addition, over a million dollars went to Samaritan’s Purse and The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association in different forms.

How could this happen?

1. Financial discipline—not business practices. We followed Biblical financial disciplines. Let me explain: Often in ministry we look for and follow business principles, thus looking past Biblical financial principles. I am not sure why we do this except that it sounds right. However, in reality it is wrong. Business that is not Bible-based is not the right model. Why would we want to follow the business model when many fail for financial reasons or their top leaders go to jail? At best, they are driven by profit—dollars made (profit) drives investment. Instead, we decided to look at the Biblical financial disciplines. This was fleshed out in the following ways:
  - When people resigned, we came to an agreement and treated them with respect. One month’s pay for each year of service was the norm, as well as providing counseling and other support services to them.
  - We only spent what we had. I believe cash flow is a spending problem—therefore when you know that the summer is slow, you spend less. Our finances never pulled our vision but pushed it.
  - We hired the best financial person I could find and let her run the financial part. I stayed as far away from it as possible for integrity reasons as well as for value reasons.
  - We broke 40 years or more of radio history with systems that did not “make sense” in today’s environment.
  - We developed income streams that were value based not “give us or me or donate to us or me” based.
  - We developed a relational funding environment (this goes back to Discipline # 4.)

- We developed a partnership model of ministry (this goes back Discipline # 4.)
- We developed a generous versus scarcity mindset and environment (this is the heart of discipline # 5)
- We developed a system to count everything because the outcome measured against the vision told us if we are accomplishing what God has called us into ministry to do.

Yes, there is more. However, these nine core beliefs that I worked on daily all worked into our vision and mission that led to God giving us favor in 2005 by allowing us to plan for \$2 Million in a 2-day Share-a-thon (Since we were a listener supported radio ministry we needed to raise our own operating funds which we did at this 2 day event each year) and hitting it - a first for Christian radio in the US!

2. We were accountable to create an environment of “WOW!” When people got involved in a project or volunteered (we had 300 volunteers) we made sure they had a “wow” experience. There is nothing that will add greater value to a person than vision and the “wow” factor. By the way, the “wow” is God’s part. We need to create the environment for God to do His “wow” in our life, then we have buy-in and the flywheel begins to turn. CAUTION: We are never to create the “wow”—just the environment!

*I believe we are accountable for the stewardship of the outcome of our life and ministry - which includes the financial and environment part...*

You see, when we do our part to the best of our ability, God will do His part. He is responsible and we are accountable.

## **DISCIPLINE # 6 - WHEN YOU RECEIVE GOD'S FAVOR AND BLESSING, REMEMBER IT CAME FROM HIM!**

1. God wants us to be successful (1 Timothy 6:17 and John 10:10). Today, Blue Ridge Broadcasting continues to grow and the team is doing very well. It has changed from when I was there—and that is good.
2. All God wants is for us to give away what He has given us—a pond is dead, moldy and lifeless because it gives nothing away. The River is full of life because it gives it away.
3. It is all about God and He has chosen you to be the difference-maker—it involves YOU: the choices you make, the heart you have, and the attitude you have.
4. Keep the lid off! Dr. John C. Maxwell talks a lot about the “Law of the Lid.” I have seen too many ministries and too many Christians put a lid on life and ministry by holding people back and controlling

their growth. God took the lid off and told us to go. So, go for it—go and “run the race until I return.”

I am just one person in a sea of people. Many people, if not most, have more wisdom, more integrity, more finances and more energy. But I am going to continue to climb higher and help others get into the blessing zone at their point of entry and go for it - how about you?

Just a note, today I invite you to visit the four exciting ministries God has allowed Blue Ridge Broadcasting to grow into:

- WMIT 106.9 FM “The Light.” They are the 12<sup>th</sup> largest land mass FM radio station in the USA, playing a mixture of contemporary Christian music with biblically based talk shows: [www.wmit.org](http://www.wmit.org) (link)
- WFGW 1010 AM “Faith and Freedom” covers Western NC offering a unique blend of Bible teaching and conservative talk.
- WFGW.org (link) features the Southern Gospel music you love with highlights and interesting background stories on the artists that perform it.
- Spanish radio via Internet LaLuzDeCristo.org as una estación de radio Cristiana en español via internet. La radio ofrece enseñanza bíblica y música Cristiana llamativas con programas tales como “Enfoque a la Familia,” Momento Decisivo”, y “Conceptos Financieros.”



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