



## A Strategic Conversation with Dr. Pat Robertson

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Strategic conversations can mine valuable information from strategic leaders from which others can draw encouragement, knowledge, and best practices. This essay discusses one such interview with Christian Broadcasting Network founder, Dr. Pat Robertson, who successfully put strategy into practice. Other organizations that he founded include Regent University, Operation Blessing International, and WorldReach. Current strategic leadership literature was reviewed in order to develop a line of questions that would pull out key contributors to his success. The interview revealed several themes that leaders can put into practice in order to improve their own skills. Included were creation and deployment of a vision, personal leadership traits, leveraging technology, encouraging innovation, and more. This strategic conversation also provided advice not normally found in leadership literature including the importance of humility, faith, and harmony.

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Thousands of books, videos, and short courses designed to help those desiring to become successful strategic leaders have appeared within the last three decades. They make promises of more effective leadership, business building, team motivation, and increased profit margins. This sounds great: who wouldn't want to be a successful and prosperous leader? However, a deeper look into who wrote these books or developed these strategies and theories many times reveals their credentials are academic versus practical experience and actual accomplishments. Some even suggest the examples that many "leadership" gurus point to as evidence to support their theories are nothing more than a coincidence, luck, or random fluctuation (Raynor & Ahmed, 2013). This essay examines the practice of strategic leadership through an interview with one of the most successful leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Dr. Pat Robertson, who continues to draw near to reaching his seemingly impossible vision of "...reaching the entire world for Christ via radio and

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television” (Robertson & Buckingham, 1972, p. x). Through this essay, it is hoped that today’s strategic leaders or leaders of the future can draw encouragement, knowledge, and best practices from his incredible accomplishments.

The method of an interview was chosen in order to facilitate a strategic conversation with Dr. Robertson. Strategic conversations allow one to investigate the hows, whats, and whys of the paths successful individuals and organizations have followed and permits foresight into the future (Ratcliffe, 2002). After meeting Dr. Robertson several years ago, it was clear he was a strategic thinker who has a vast array of knowledge from which other leaders could learn. A strategic thinker has been described as one who focuses “...on taking different approaches to delivering customer value; on choosing different sets of activities that cannot be easily imitated, thereby providing a basis for an enduring competitive edge” (DeKluyver & Pearce, 2009, p. 6). Another definition is someone who possesses the “...cognitive processes required for the collection, interpretation, generation, and evaluation of information and ideas that shape an organization’s sustainable competitive advantage” (Hughes & Beatty, 2005, p. 44). Although all these definitions fit Dr. Robertson, strategic thinking guru Irene Sander’s description probably fits him best. She noted the strategic thinker uses “...an intuitive, visual, creative process that results in a synthesis of emerging themes, issues, patterns, connections, and opportunities” resulting in “insight about the present and foresight about the future” (Sanders, 1998, p. 162). Dr. Robertson’s insight and foresight along with his restless mind and dogged persistence played key roles in his stunning accomplishments (Harrell, 2010, p. x).

### **Despise not the day of small beginnings—Zechariah 4:10**

His own media beginnings began in 1959. Dr. Robertson remembers, “I was manager of a little broken down TV station. I ran camera, I worked on the transmitters, I did the bookkeeping, I just did everything myself because I did not have much staff. In the early days, that’s the way it was” (Robertson, personal communication). The station generated a total of \$8,000 the first year and \$20,000 the second year. Despite a law degree and numerous lucrative opportunities, Dr. Robertson felt this was where he was supposed to be. He had prayed, listened, and followed the direction of the Lord to the television station in Portsmouth, Virginia. From these small beginnings, he created an empire that would bring millions to the Lord.

Professor Dave Harrell summarized Dr. Robertson’s accomplishments that started so small as follows:

He was a pioneer in the development of the cable television industry, a relentless innovator in religious programming, the founder of a significant humanitarian organization, a major player in the worldwide Pentecostal/charismatic revival in the developing world, the founder and molder of a respected and well-endowed university, and the founder and patron of one of the most successful conservative legal advocacy organizations in this country. (2010, p. x)

### **He who has ears to hear, let him hear—Matthew 11:15**

What path did Dr. Robertson take from such small beginnings to a multi-million dollar ministry operating around the world? It could be said that he possesses “deep smarts,” defined as “business-critical expertise, built up through years of experience, which helps them make wise, swift decisions about both strategy and tactics” (Leonard, Barton, & Barton, 2013). Like Dr. Robertson, people who possess these deep smarts are skilled at strategy and decision making which leads them to success after success. These are not skills that can be learned in school but are best “pulled” out of others, either through close observation of the way they operate or through questioning (2013, p. 128).

In order to develop a line of questions that would pull out some of these deep smarts, a review of current strategic leadership literature was conducted. There are some main themes which emerged from the review on what characteristics most successful strategic leaders possess. Some of these characteristics (Northouse, 2012, p.12) are included below along with the questions developed or found (Ratcliffe, 2002, p. 25) from which to mine insight:

- Foresight and establishing direction—Where do you see your organization in 50 years? What is the most important piece of advice you have for upcoming leaders?
- Ability to create and deploy a vision—How did you create a vision for your organization and deploy it?
- Motivating and inspiring—How do you encourage your people to be creative and innovative?
- Strategic Thinking—What is your worst nightmare regarding your organization or the environment impacting it? What is the best possible thing that could happen for your organization?
- Aligning people and technology—How have you leveraged technology to achieve your mission?

### **Where there is no vision, the people perish—Proverbs 29:18**

The interview with Dr. Robertson took place at the CBN Headquarters building. The questions developed served as a baseline to stimulate the strategic conversation. Dr. Robertson proved to be highly intelligent, engaging, quick-witted, focused, and direct.

#### **Where do you see your organization in 50 years?**

Dr. Robertson reminded me that he had three large organizations: Regent University, CBN, and Operation Blessing International. Regarding Regent University, he noted he had set a pretty high goal. “I want us to be the preeminent source of Christian thought and practice throughout the world. I want to set as my goal either Oxford or the Sorbonne in the Middle Ages, in which they were the dominate centers of Christian thought” (Robertson, personal communication). He said there were not any current-day universities that he wanted to emulate because he felt many of

today's universities were declining. Dr. Robertson reiterated that he wanted to set high goals for the university. "Are we going to make it? Only the Lord knows, but that's where we are heading," he reflected (personal communication).

Dr. Robertson's visionary approach was clearly evident in his goals for the Christian Broadcasting Network. He recalled, "In 1995, I was praying and the Lord made it clear there was going to be a spiritual renewal around the world and we should move to take advantage of it" (Robertson, personal communication). And that he did! After changing the name of CBN International to WorldReach, he held a weeklong "RevivalFest," which was attended by such well known Christian speakers as Oral Roberts, T. L. Osborn, Benny Hinn, James Robison, Robert Schuller, and Bill Bright (Harrell, 2010, p. 220). RevivalFest was reported to be an "internal spiritual event, exhilarating to the staff and core supporters" (Harrell, 2010, p. 220). It was in this charged atmosphere that he challenged his organization to bring 500 million people to faith in Jesus Christ. During the interview Dr. Robertson reported, "We have already exceeded that goal, which is extraordinary to begin with. We are producing programs in 58 different languages and operating in one way or another in about 200 different countries—we want to have a major impact on the world and I think in a sense we are doing it. It is now a question of deepening what we are all about, making better programs, and reaching larger segments of the population" (Robertson, personal communication).

Dr. Robertson's vision for Operation Blessing is just as extraordinary. He reported, "We want to alleviate suffering where ever there is suffering. That takes in a lot of people—so we feed the hungry, we clothe the naked, we house the homeless, we minister to medical needs of people, and we help people suffering from disasters. I have set a preliminary goal of spending \$1 billion a year of services—I think that in 50 years it will go much bigger than that" (Robertson, personal communication). Today Operation Blessing is recognized as one of the top humanitarian organizations in the world. It received a 5-star rating from Ministry Watch and was listed as #2 out of over 400 charities (Operation Blessing International Financial Information, 2013). Operation Blessing was one of the first humanitarian organizations to provide assistance to victims of Hurricane Katrina, the 2005 tsunami, and the recent Hurricane Sandy. It currently operates on a daily basis in 23 countries (Operation Blessing International, 2013). Since 1978, Operation Blessing has touched over 202 million people and spent over \$3.3 billion.

In looking into the future, Dr. Robertson uses a global, visionary approach. There are few leaders in history who have been able to accomplish the achievements he has. One method it appears Dr. Robertson has used is the concept of stretch goals as a strategy. This theory suggests that successful strategies are built upon not only what is but what could be (DeKluyver & Pearce, 2009, p. 17). Studies have shown that stretch strategies encourage innovation and knowledge creation, increase problem solving, and motivate organizational members (Choo, 2011). This has certainly been the case as Dr. Robertson has set goals and then empowered his organization to systemically achieve them.

### **How did you create a vision for your organization and deploy it?**

The ability of an organization to prosper relies heavily on its leader's ability to embody and communicate their vision to all members (Phillips, 1992, p. 162). As attested to by where he sees each of his organizations in fifty years, Dr. Robertson clearly articulates his vision and interweaves it continually through his speeches, television programs, and daily activities. He does not take credit for the vision, noting, "In a sense, I like to think I had some overarching vision which was mine but it really came out of prayer. I asked the Lord what he wanted to do and took it step by step" (Robertson, personal communication).

Effective visions call upon the past, relate to the present, and provide a path to the future (Phillips, 1992, p. 169). Much like President Lincoln during the Civil War, Dr. Robertson uses this principle to reaffirm, reassert, and remind his organizations about the principles they were founded upon (p. 169). As he experienced growth, his vision also grew. Dr. Robertson noted, "Your vision, in a sense, comes out of work. I don't like people being parachuted into an organization from on high... I would rather have somebody who has been hands-on from the early days" (Robertson, personal communication). He used Regent University as another example of small beginnings, "...we had 7 professors and 77 students in our first class in a rented office building—now we have 7,000 or more students—it's grown right much" (personal communication).

Dr. Robertson has lived long enough to see many of his seemingly impossible visions through to fruition. In meeting his vision of bringing 500 million souls to Christ through his organization, he proved his ability to effectively deploy and achieve a vision. This was a vision that everyone in the organization could understand, whether they were working a phone bank, behind or in front of a camera, making sets, or cleaning the floors in the evening. They all knew they were working to bring the gospel to the nations and they still do. Professor David Harrell noted that Dr. Robertson's vision "is a legacy that is likely to influence Christianity around the world and American politics for many years" (Harrell, 2010, p. ix).

### **What do you do to encourage your people to be creative and innovative?**

Recognition of employees is a key motivator in driving performance and innovation (Graham, 2008). Within his varied organizations, Dr. Robertson consistently promoted and used three virtues in recognizing his people. He noted, "A long, long time ago I realized as far as the ministry part, we were trendsetters—we went where nobody else had gone before and that was one of the things we took pride in. We were not copying anybody, at least in our peer group. We were innovators and I wanted to encourage that so I started something called the President's Award for Excellence" (Robertson, personal communication). Each year at Christmas time, he gives out awards of \$1000 cash and a certificate to those who distinguished themselves and upheld three virtues: integrity, innovation, and excellence. "We insist on integrity; we insist that whatever we tell anyone is honest and we work with integrity. We want innovators in everything.

We want people on the cutting edge trying to breakthrough barriers that didn't exist before. Our award each year recognizes people who have displayed those three virtues." Experts report that, unless recognition is tied to something meaningful behind it, it will not serve to motivate team members (Ventrice, 2009, p. 15). By tying his award to the three virtues, Dr. Robertson has provided recognition that everyone can relate to. Regarding innovation, on the flip side, Dr. Robertson warned, "There is nothing more deadly than micro-managing people. We don't micro-manage people; we let them have freedom" (Robertson, personal communication).

**What is your worst nightmare regarding your organization or the environment impacting it?**

Interview gurus note that this type of question will normally draw out the interviewees' priorities, expose how their ideas of the world fall into place, and allow values to surface (Ratcliffe, 2002, p. 26). There was no hesitation as Dr. Robertson answered: "We can survive any outside shot but it is the internal that is important. I think the worst nightmare, the worst problem, is when people begin to fight among themselves. I am very strong on harmony. You must have harmony to make things happen—with disharmony nothing is possible. So if you work in harmony together, nothing is impossible. But if you work in disharmony, nothing is possible. The worst nightmare would be we lose that sense of cohesion, the sense of love for each other as we work together" (Robertson, personal communication).

**What is the best possible thing that could happen for your organization?**

Dr. Robertson's response to this question did not deal with current operations but looked again to the future. He responded, "I think the best thing would be a breakthrough initiative—some new creative thing. I think we are in the process of doing that but I think a breakthrough of an intellectual format that brings about new initiatives would be the best thing and, again, we want to hear from God. We recognize the ownership of this organization belongs to Him not us" (Robertson, personal communication).

**How have you leveraged technology to achieve your mission?**

Dr. Robertson's technological innovations to produce quality, culturally sensitive Christian broadcasting around the world has proven to be one of the most effective tools of promoting Christianity in the developing world (Harrell, 2010, p. ix). Dr. Robertson reported, "We believe in using technology to the fullest. Over the last three or four years, we have opened big production studios in Jakarta in Indonesia, Delhi in India, Manila in the Philippines, Kiev in the Ukraine, and a facility in Thailand. We have been moving in these last several years to a great deal of indigenous programming, which is very effective. We broadcast in about 58 different language" (Robertson, personal communication).

Dr. Robertson has made it a point to stay on top of current technology and maintained state of the art sets and control rooms. His WorldReach model has allowed the regional centers around

the world to adapt culturally to the country or area they are trying to reach (Harrell, 2010, p. 227). For example, in some countries such as China, the Christian message has to be muted, while other regional centers can freely work with churches and proclaim the gospel (p. 227). Dr. Robertson's innovative and strategic use of technology was the key to reaching his goal of bringing 500 million to Christ.

### **What is the most important piece of advice you have for upcoming leaders?**

Once again, Dr. Robertson's answer summed up what others have written books about: "My philosophy above all else, besides listening to the Lord, is to hire the very best people possible and give them a strategic vision of where you want to go and give maximum freedom to employees to carry out the vision" (Robertson, personal communication). A key characteristic of a Servant Leader is humility (Northouse, 2012, p. 224). Although he embodies more than one leadership style, it was not surprising Dr. Robertson singled out this trait. "For leadership the most important virtue is humility, to have a Servant's heart, to listen to what people are saying, and to be empathetic to employees. I think that pride and arrogance are killers" (personal communication). At the same time, Dr. Robertson noted "While we have a collegial atmosphere, if people can't perform the task satisfactorily, it is no crime in firing them" (personal communication). Dr. Robertson used the metaphor of a bus regarding this philosophy, "You have to get some people on the bus and some other ones off the bus" (personal communication). He noted good leaders had to be prepared to do that and, in most cases, it is kinder to terminate people who are not performing adequately than to let them continue as deadweight, dragging down the organization as well as themselves.

Dr. Robertson used Jesus as an example of what a successful leader should do. He explained Jesus "got twelve people around him and then spent three years training them. That is the key—a highly motivated staff that has the training to fulfill the tasks at hand" (personal communication).

### **Conclusion**

As suggested by the literature, strategic conversations can facilitate drawing key information out of people that may be missed otherwise. In this strategic conversation with Dr. Robertson, several key themes emerged that can guide leaders as they put strategy into practice. It has been said that visionary leaders operate on the spiritual and emotional resources of the organization and assemble a view of the future that is easily understood, attractive, and energizing (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998, p. 137). Dr. Robertson clearly articulated not just one, but several visions, for his various organizations that captured people's hearts, minds, and spirits. Deploying his vision at every opportunity and celebrating innovations allowed for reinforcement and encouragement to do more. Continually investing and leveraging the latest technology allowed the organization to reach millions who would have been unreachable otherwise. Developing models for each organization's core processes, such as the regional broadcasting centers, resulted in quicker growth. Allowing and encouraging flexibility within those models to

adapt to cultural or political situations ensured success. Hiring the best people and ensuring they were properly trained and motivated was also key in achieving his accomplishments.

Other themes that emerged from the conversation were concepts that most leadership books and resources normally do not mention: the significance of harmony within an organization and recognition of the damage that disharmony can do, the importance humility plays in leaders and the dangers of pride and arrogance. Throughout the conversation, Dr. Robertson revealed another competency that has not been highly touted in the literature—that of listening to and leaning on God.

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### About the Author

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