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BOOK REVIEW

Wickman, Gino. *Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business*. Dallas: BenBella Books, 2011. 230 pp. \$16.95

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In his book *Traction*, Gino Wickman, the founder of EOS Worldwide, seeks to provide small businesses and entrepreneurs with not just information and insight but an actually practical and detailed strategy for improving control over the planning, organization, processes, and people that determine the health, growth and profitability of their companies. EOS stands for the “Entrepreneurial Operating System” that is, as the author defines it, “a holistic, self-sustaining system that addresses the six aspects

of your business” (xiv). Those aspects are vision, people, data, issues, process, and what he calls “traction,” the discipline of setting measurable priorities, and the accountability processes to ensure their execution. Wickman draws on his own experience in taking over his family’s business and turning it around, along with many years in leadership training in which he has done “over 1300 full day sessions with leadership teams of over 120 entrepreneurial organizations” (xv).

For Wickman, it is not uncommon for most entrepreneurs and businesses to run into challenges and frustrations along the way. As a company develops, and especially if it grows, it will be increasingly difficult to manage time, business processes, and planning efficiently. People can become a challenge if they aren’t properly aligned in their roles, responsibilities, and with the values and objectives of the business. As he repeatedly states, “It all comes down getting the right people in the right seats” (81). Eventually, growth will hit a ceiling. There can be confusion both on the level of having clarity about where you want to go next and what is necessary to do to get there. The primary objective of the book is to provide tools that will help leaders have clarity, to communicate clearly, and to have processes in place that enable their team to do the same.

To that end, the centerpiece of the book is a chart that Wickman has developed called “The Vision/Traction Organizer” (32-33). All the chapters of the book and all the other tools that go with each chapter are designed to help the business leader use the “VTO” as an ongoing tool for maintaining clarity of vision and accountability for goals and processes. For example, one of the first priorities of *Traction* is to define the core values of the organization. This is the foundation. As the leadership team defines the company’s core values, those values shape everything. They determine whether someone is or isn’t a good fit for the organization. They shape which opportunities and actions are to be pursued. Wickman writes, “The process of gaining traction starts here. Clarify your vision and you will make better decisions about people, processes, finances, strategies and customers” (29). So, every meeting, whether it is the annual planning meeting or what Wickman calls the quarterly or weekly “pulse” meetings, should have those values clearly before all the leaders responsible for the

execution of the company's goals. They are clear, and team members are accountable for upholding and aligning with them.

The other objective of the book is to create a system of goal setting, communication, and accountability that is simplified and efficient. Wickman writes, "Simplifying your organization is key" (19). Alongside the emphasis on organizational clarity, this emphasis on simplicity is what I am convinced is the strength of the book. My reason for examining this book was to consider to what extent these organizational principles are transferrable to not-for-profit organizations, particularly the church. One of the challenges in church ministry, especially in smaller and growing churches, is that a large percentage of your staff members are volunteers. If you have volunteers who are living full, busy, and competent lives, they do not have the time (and often, the tolerance) to spend hours spinning their wheels in inefficient or unclear processes. Your best people want to be involved in something valuable, purposeful, effective, and challenging.

There is no doubt that implementation of Wickman's strategy will take some significant upfront work to get it rolling. However, most organizations like churches do regular, at least annual, vision setting processes. The difficulty that most of us face is that the vision often gets lost as time goes on in the regular rhythms and demands of ministry life, along with the normal hardship of having people communicate and then execute the plan without growing weary, discouraged, and distracted with insufficient feedback and follow up. Visions are often reduced to mere slogans.

The strength of the book then is that it provides a perspective and process for setting goals *and* executing them. Once a church has clarity about its values and its God-given "core focus" (what unique role your organization has instead of trying to do everything that everyone else is doing), and once it has set its ten-year and three-year goals, Wickman provides a guide for the shorter-term targets that seem manageable. He shows how to set a one-year plan, with quarterly "rocks" (90-day targets) and an "issue" list. He gives detailed instructions, including content and time breakdowns, for an annual planning meeting, "the Build Up" (quarterly meeting), and the "Weekly Meeting Pulse" (chapt. 8). I believe that Wickman is accurate when he says, "If you don't continue to align quarterly, your organization will fragment to the point that you will get far off track, you will start to

lose great people, you will lose sight of your vision, and you will end up right back where you started – in chaos” (179).

The challenge that becomes evident, as Wickman lays out his plan, is determining who is going to lead the charge on the implementation and follow-through of walking through the process in its first stages. Once the plan is in place, it will provide clarity, simplification, and accountability. Concerning this challenge, the author’s chapter on “The People Component” is helpful, I believe, particularly for churches. While Wickman spends significant time talking about the process of “getting the right people in the right seats,” he spends some time distinguishing between what he calls the “Visionary” and the “Integrator.” The visionary, he writes, “has 10 new ideas a week. Nine of them might not be so great, but one usually is, and it’s that one idea each week that keeps the group growing.” He adds, “By contrast, integrators are typically very good at leading, managing, and holding people accountable. They love running the day to day aspects of business” (94). This insight has particular relevance for the church. There are probably few pastors who are both high visionaries and integrators. The success of a church moving beyond its current barriers and eliminating many of its insufficiencies or lack of clarity requires the intentional partnership of a plurality of leaders/elders who work together to see the plan realized. If this is done and the differences between these leadership styles are embraced, it promises some real fruitfulness in ministry.

Finally, one of the most helpful contributions of this book is that it shows how important visualization is to serving clarity and effectiveness in an organization. Wickman continually uses charts for everything that he is teaching. For example, in the chapter on “The Process Component,” he encourages leaders to “create your Circle of Life Visual.” (161). The visual lays out the primary processes that are involved in an organization and what each process is responsible for executing. Seeing the visual not only clarifies areas of responsibility but reinforces why each part is essential for the achievement of the organization’s goals. One simple application for church leadership is that we need to help people see what we are saying if we expect them to understand it, embrace it, retain it, and invest in it.

While the overarching objective of *Traction* is increased growth and profitability, I do believe that there is significant transferability to churches

of any size. The weaknesses of the book have more to do with its values and objectives not being eternal and spiritual, but that is not its stated goal. The risk for any Christian leader would be to apply this without a clear recognition that the power is in prayer, the gospel, and the community of faith; but Wickman's plan does make room for these values in his vision planning section. As a seasoned pastor, I wish that I would have read something of this nature far earlier in my ministry.