

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### Uphill Dreams and Downhill Habits

*Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.*

*Prior articles can be found at [www.efcawest.org](http://www.efcawest.org). Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.*

Last year I attended Willow Creek's Global Leadership Conference at a video site near my home. There were lots of speakers and lots of good things said. But one statement has stuck with me ever since, and I want to share it with you. The speaker was John Maxwell. He was talking about one of the difficulties related to leadership, namely that all the good stuff seems to be "uphill." I've often said that everything significant that we do is harder than we thought, takes longer than we thought, and costs more than we thought, but John simply and eloquently described the wonderful results we leaders long for as being "uphill." Then he dropped a bombshell. He said the problem we leaders face is that we have uphill dreams (insert long, theatrical pause here...), and downhill habits.

In that one sentence, John Maxwell summed up a battle I have fought my entire life – sometimes winning, and sometimes losing. My dreams and aspirations require constant effort to move them "uphill," but I am often beset by my own downhill habits.

In my work with church leaders, I have found this to be broadly true. We have great dreams but often allow our habits – our behaviors – to drag us down rather than propel us onward in our uphill climb. Addressing these downhill habits reminds me of my spiritual need to lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles me as I run the race Christ has set before me (Hebrews 12:1-2).

I have found it easier to address or prevent downhill habits by allowing myself to be accountable to others who care about my work and my ministry. Because there is insight, strength and comfort in our journeys by addressing these behavioral issues, our propensity for lapsing into downhill habits is something to talk about.

Here are some ideas for starting the conversation with your leadership teammates.

- What are some of the “downhill habits” that emerge in us most often that derail attaining our most important intentions and dreams? I suspect you’ll find procrastination, attempts to multi-task, distractions, failure to prioritize, lack of organization, and letting urgent things take up time for important things to be among the top responses.
- What are some strategies or tools you have successfully used in the past to mitigate the tendency to drift back into downhill habits? I have used habits 1-3 from Stephen R. Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and principles from Dave Allen’s *Getting Things Done* with success – at least as long as I persevere in doing them.
- Do we actually plan (as in *schedule*) our week? Does our weekly schedule include important things from both work and personal time? I learned that I am not as effective in scheduling my time when I use a digital device for my calendar – I went back to an old-school paper planner and found that it works much better for me. What works for you? Does it *really* work well for you?
- Is there anyone with whom you share your calendar and priorities? How can we leverage existing relationships (or start new ones) to help us stay on track with the most important things in our ministry and life? I value our twice-monthly EFCA West staff conference calls as a tool to help me differentiate and share the most important things in my life and ministry from things of lesser importance. For the solo pastor, perhaps another nearby solo pastor could be your partner in effectiveness. You may want to have quarterly conversations with someone from your denomination. When I had a secretary, I found it very beneficial to share with her first thing each day what my goals were for that day so that she could help me stay focused and, occasionally, run interference to prevent distractions.
- Have we paused recently to ask ourselves, “What *are* the important things – the uphill things – that we dream of accomplishing?” This may be the most important conversation of all – coming to clarity and agreement on what it is that we are trying to do.

While these conversations may not seem to have much to do with spiritual things, they actually have everything to do with our stewardship of the tasks that God has laid before us as church leaders. It breaks my heart to meet with church leaders who are stuck in place, at the helm of declining congregations and without any discernable dreams or plans or habits to get there. New results require new actions. If you find yourself or your church with uphill dreams but downhill habits, it’s time to ask for help. I know our team at EFCA West would love to come alongside and help you with this work, and I suspect your friends and fellow leadership team members would love to help as well.

What’s stopping you from starting the conversation? Let’s be real. We all struggle with uphill dreams and downhill habits. That’s something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.  
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