

**8 SECRETS to a
Mission-Driven
CHURCH**

**Understanding the Impact of Strategic
Thinking and Deliberate Action**

DAN DAY



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It Is Not Really About Being the Smartest Person in the Room

But let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

—Romans 12:2

In the pages ahead, the phrase *Adventist mission smarts* will be used to suggest that there are some rather distinctive things Adventists bring to the table—stuff that could be game changing in character if we were to deliver it well. But the phrase also implies that in order to fulfill our Adventist end-time mission, we need to be exceptionally strategic and captured by the language of becoming more mission driven.

When we begin thinking seriously about Adventist mission smarts, we have to start with some clarity about what smart Adventist leaders put at the top of their agendas. What is the single most important thing we are determined to do in our church or organization, so that mission can be achieved? We are talking about that sustained, strategic culture of mission-driven excellence mentioned earlier. But what is it that God most needs from us in these end times? Is it a focus on the Sabbath? Is it a renewed emphasis on vegetarianism? What about the sanctuary doctrine, the proper interpretation of when we may need to flee to the mountains, or who gets 666 on

* That one thing will sometimes be unique to your church or organization. For example, in one pilot congregation, the focus was consistently on mission. The pastor constantly asked his local leaders, “How does this affect mission?” In another, the focus was on bringing someone to church each week, so all conversation was directed toward making that happen.

their foreheads? If we get that right, will it enable us to reach the millions who do not now know about Jesus?

Adventists believe God has put us in this place, in this time, to achieve something special that will not happen on its own. God has put us here to deliver a witness to His character that addresses the confusion over who He is and what He is doing. We live in a world where Christianity bears a stained reputation and where God is seen as irrelevant because Christians are no longer offering a compelling witness. The simple picture of a God who loves us and who is coming to take us home with Him has been hidden behind layers of culture wars, like a painted masterpiece covered by someone's amateurish efforts.

If the truth about God has been overwritten by a negative Christian witness, how can we correct it? The seriousness of the moment forces us to come to grips with the fact that this is not a story we can just talk our way through; we must live it out before the eyes of our communities. Jesus Himself said it: When people see how we love one another and love them, they will realize that something unprecedented is happening and be drawn to it. They will see that we are His disciples (see John 13:35). We must replace this failed witness with a far better story—one featuring transformed churches and church organizations.

If we still need a bit more clarity on Adventist mission smarts, I want to be clear that I will not be featuring the achievements of “the smartest person in the room,” who wows us by his or her quick mind and clever turn of phrase. Neither will I focus on the person with the most baptisms or the one who climbs the ladder to the General Conference offices in the shortest time. The truth is, Jesus spent three years pouring out His soul into twelve disciples, and one of them betrayed Him. He preached to lots of people, and eventually many of them became believers; but He focused on that small handful because He knew that a shepherd has to be able to touch the sheep.

“Wait a minute,” you may be saying. “Aren't we talking about how churches and organizations go from good to great?” You probably would not be reading this book if you did not want great things to happen in your church or organization. But what would greatness look like in mission-driven

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Adventist terms? Would it be the person who ends up with the biggest church, or would it be something deeper and more lasting, such as leaving behind a legacy of changed lives? Is greatness, in Adventist mission terms, about someone whose name is on everybody's lips? Or is it about the person who had such a profound impact on a few people that we are forced to say, "Whatever it is he or she has, I want some"? As an Adventist leader, what sort of legacy do you want to leave behind? Is it just broad, or do you also want it to be deep?

I am not saying we cannot excel. But I am asking us to think a bit more deeply about what excellence looks like.

Going from good to great

In the business world, few voices carry more weight than Jim Collins. He has written several research-based bestsellers on how organizations become more successful.¹ After five years of studying how some companies make the leap from good to great while others do not, he came up with what he called "Level 5 leaders." A Level 5 leader is a person "who blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will." He describes them as "self-effacing individuals who displayed the fierce resolve to do whatever needed to be done to make the company great."² They are also men and women who are not afraid to face the truth about what success might mean in today's world: "All good-to-great companies began the process of finding a path to greatness by confronting the brutal facts of their current reality. . . . It is impossible to make good decisions without infusing the entire process with an honest confrontation of the brutal facts."³

What are the "brutal facts" that Adventist leadership in North America must face as we seek to go from good to great? Evangelical researcher George Barna, who has been tracking the brutal facts of church decline for several years, writes the following: "The church landscape will continue to evolve into something that would have been unrecognizable a quarter century ago. . . . The mainline churches and even some of the evangelical and fundamentalist groups that were solid at the end of the last millennium and the beginning of this one will lose altitude unless they substantially reinvent themselves."⁴

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This idea of churches needing to “reinvent themselves” shows up in many evangelical publications and sermons these days because we are well aware that the church is in deep trouble. The simple truth is that the church in North America is losing traction rapidly and struggling to hold on. In his book *The Great Evangelical Recession*, John Dickerson lists what is happening to the church:

- The fuel of American evangelicalism—dollars—is disappearing and will dwindle over the next three decades.
- We are losing millions of our own people—about 2.6 million per decade, just from one generation studied.
- The evangelical church is not winning new believers fast enough to keep pace with the rapid population growth in the United States.
- While these forces eat at the church internally, the external climate is turning against evangelicals. The fastest-growing subcultures in the United States express a militant antagonism against Christians who take the Bible seriously.
- What is left of a smaller, shrinking, strapped church is also splintering and splitting itself over political and postmodern views of God and the Bible.⁵

Has the gospel lost its appeal, or have the audiences shifted so that new approaches are needed?

There is one last brutal fact I want to note before we move directly to Adventism’s own brutal facts: we are mistaken if we believe it is only our young adults who are leaving the church. Researcher Julia Duin studied church-exit trends in her book *Quitting Church*. She found that it is not just young people who are leaving but singles over thirty-five and single moms of all ages:

My research suggested that people are simply not being pastored. . . .

I ran into demographic groups, such as men and singles, who have abandoned the church in large numbers because they are fed up with their needs never being addressed. Singles are the largest demographic

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among the unchurched. A third group, working moms, is about to join those two demographics.⁶

Are we Adventists immune to these challenges? The pathway ahead in Adventism, particularly here in North America, is on a very similar trajectory. Moreover, we, too, need to reinvent ourselves if we want to become excellent during these tumultuous end times. It is true that we have many good things happening in the church. But as one leader recently commented during a strategic-planning brainstorming session at the division offices, “We have many wonderful programs, doing amazing, good stuff. We just need to make the connections. When we start actually working together to advance hope and wholeness, more and more people will look at what is happening and say: ‘I want to get in the flow, and facing outward, reach our world for God.’”⁷

Several other leaders around the table that day echoed the reality that Adventists are doing many good things, but we are losing ground. One man called for the sort of multilevel strategy the North American Division has been advocating: “There are a lot of good things in our church at all levels, but what is needed is a multilevel strategy that connects the division to unions, to conferences, to pastors, and ultimately to members in the pew.”⁸

What is the smart way forward?

What is this “multilevel strategy” that could give cohesion to our efforts? How do we transform our members for mission? As Dickerson puts it: “In all likelihood, the ‘problem’ beneath the loss of our youth has little to do with youth, and everything to do with our fumbling of basic discipleship among our adults.”⁹ Could that be true of Adventists as well? Are we “fumbling” in our approach to discipleship? Certainly, discipleship training is involved. During the past several years, I have spent most of my time working on a compelling discipleship training resource for Adventism.*

* The North American Division now offers, at AdventSource, a comprehensive discipleship training resource called iFollow as well as many books that are available at Adventist Book Centers.⁹

Behind that sort of training effort must be a culture that reimagines what an adult Christian should be like. Such a Christian experience requires a new, more compelling Adventist culture with different priorities.

I have a friend who has often (and in all humility, of course) described himself as being “the smartest guy in the room.” This usually comes up when we have left some meeting in which he has been less than impressed by the conversation he has heard. I have always suspected his comments may partially be attempts at humor, but each time I have wondered whether being the smartest guy in the room may be a handicap at times. Being smart is a good thing, of course. But what kind of smart are we describing? What if the smartest guy is not doing any better than someone of less heroic capabilities? Is it possible that we need a new kind of smartness, based on new cultural priorities?

Adventism in transition

Today, Adventism is in the middle of a transition. Those of us leading out are often at more of a disadvantage than we realize—regardless of how smart we are—because we are between what Adventism used to be, with the traditions and power structures that supported success, and what it is about to become, which is something quite new and different. I disagree with those who only look backward, arguing that the church is in decline, with its best days in the past. I believe that we are moving into a moment with some remarkable opportunities. This time of transition is reflected by our younger Adventist professionals, who are not only highly educated and often impatient but have also been born into a new age of collaboration—they expect leadership to understand these changes and are frustrated when it becomes obvious we do not care to understand.

Those of us in Adventist leadership are like immigrants to this new world of thought and practice, where collaboration and diversity are so powerful. Our younger members and employees are sometimes more like natives to this world, and they speak the language fluently. It is worth noting, though, that when we allow them the opportunity, these bright and capable young adults are often eager to teach the rest of us how to navigate it. In the face of all this, leaders—at whatever level—must begin to think deeper about

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these collaborations. Which leads us to the language of Christian apologist Frederick Buechner, who reminds us that the gospel is tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale.¹⁰ By that last part, he means that in fairy tales anything is possible and extraordinary things happen to ordinary people.

Buechner argues that in our own lives as Christians, even more extraordinary things can happen. Adventists, for example, have a rather distinctive story to tell people—one about a loving Father who wants to share life with us and has thrown His impressive weight behind efforts to save us. But for this to be understood today, we must tell our own stories in such personal ways that those deeply scarred by life can see themselves in God’s story. Buechner writes the following: “But to preach the Gospel is not just to tell the truth but to tell the truth in love, and to tell the truth in love means to tell it with concern not only for the truth that is being told but with concern also for the people it is being told to. So it is crucial to keep them in mind too, the hearers of the tragic, the comic, the fairy-tale truth. Who are they? What is going on inside them?”¹¹

Think about that for a moment. I realize that Buechner’s imagery may run a bit counter to the language of those of us who are entirely focused on a propositional message. The idea that it is not enough for Adventists to *have* the truth, but that we must be able to “tell the truth in love” is a bit scary.* But the fact is, leadership success is always relational. It is about being able to touch the lives of people who are needy but cannot verbalize their deepest needs because they live in the midst of the whirlwind, as discussed in *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*.¹²

We do what we can to provide structure and order to our lives; but sometime we still find ourselves blown away by the whirlwind. Life gets complex. The careful structure disintegrates. A child dies, and we wonder how we can go on. Our marriage falls apart, and we have to admit our own role in it. Younger people find themselves in a downward spiral, incapable of handling college work, or bad choices begin catching up with them. And

* One of the major challenges we Adventists face in our more propositional messages is that contemporary audiences cannot find a place for themselves in our narrative. If they cannot find Jesus in our stories, how can we lead them to His grace?

sometimes the whirlwind sweeps through the local church.

One of the great tragedies of our times is that the vast potential in local ministry sometimes gets lost in the whirlwind of controversy and conflict. We are at odds with one another or lose sight of our priorities. Often, it happens over worship styles or some new theological innovation. Sometimes the church just grows stale or seems to go to sleep. And at times, the whirlwind appears to overwhelm the entire church so that some groups are labeled as being in rebellion and others come across as so determined to keep control that they are willing to react in ways that seem in conflict with our values.

We see the whirlwind driving people apart, but the worst part is the effect it is having on the people around us, who might otherwise see Adventism as the answer to their needs—if the church appeared to be a place of hope and healing. But instead, we find ourselves apologizing for how the church is behaving and wonder what we can do to alter things that simply seem too big for us.*

Becoming God’s “expert witnesses”

How do we get better in today’s complex setting, where Adventist storytelling has to compete with so many other stories? Becoming more strategic in the ways we deliver our storytelling can make us far more targeted and compelling. Adventists are not here just to deliver a cold, apocalyptic message, and then go sit on the sidelines to see how many people burn, as Jonah did (see Jonah 4:5). Rather, we are God’s expert witnesses to His loving, transforming character, called to engage with people, and to share true community within the church and with the people around us. And we must do these things in ways that show our contemporary audiences how the gospel is changing our lives, so that they want it for themselves. We deliver this expert witness not just by what we say, however true it is, but also by how we live our lives. The apostle Paul described this when he wrote

* The realities of mission must shape the conversation. The whirlwind of controversy is sweeping people out of the church and preventing others from coming in. We must find ways of reducing the controversy without damaging people or institutions, so that we can become the sort of faith community Jesus said would uplift Him.

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to the believers: “But thanks be to God, who continually leads us about, captives in Christ’s triumphal procession, and everywhere uses us to reveal and spread abroad the fragrance of the knowledge of himself! We are indeed the incense offered by Christ to God” (2 Corinthians 2:14, 15).

God uses us to “reveal and spread abroad the fragrance of the knowledge of himself.” Our lives add flavor and a pleasing smell to God’s story, bringing it to life in people’s eyes, ears, and even noses. We give them a new *why* for religious life, revealing that it is not about rules, better behavior, or even gaining heaven. Rather, it is about our becoming connected to a community formed by a God who loves us. Paul’s words are based on the insight Jesus provided us when He said, “I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then all will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34, 35).

There is something about Christians when we are in true community—living compassionate lives, where forgiveness and generosity are on constant display (even to one another)—that is so appealing it multiplies every other effort we make to deliver our end-time witness.

The other day I was meeting with the leadership group of a small conference in North America, and the president of the conference spoke to us of the shallow impact Adventists are making in his field: “We are in emergency mode. All the good stuff we have been doing for years is just not working any longer.” He went on to say, “The witness of Adventism in our part of the world is unsustainable unless we find something that dramatically changes the equation.” Paul Brantley and I were visiting this president’s conference to offer him and his team “something that dramatically changes the equation”: a new way of approaching mission with a powerful strategic focus. And about three-quarters of the way through the meetings, the conference president said, “We have no choice. We have to do this.”

This sense that we are in emergency mode in Adventism must capture our attention across North America. Remember the text that opened this chapter: “But let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Paul is using transformation

language, reminding us we cannot even “discern the will of God” or “know what is good” until God touches us. This affirms that God is intentional in what He does; He is never surprised or unprepared, and He puts us in places to utilize the strategic patterns that emerge from His character. God has a plan for us, says Ellen White: “Christ came to the world to convince men, by evidence that could not be controverted, that ‘God is love.’ This fact, so long disputed by Satan, is forever put at rest with unfallen worlds and with heavenly intelligences.”¹³

Do you sense the unique Adventist mission emphasis in Ellen White’s words? Jesus came to “convince” our communities “by evidence that could not be controverted,” that God is on our side and that Satan’s accusation (i.e., all God cares about is order) is utterly false. Jesus came because God loves us.

The impact of becoming more strategic

What is it about becoming more mission driven that would spark our Adventist motivation and help us serve God’s purposes better? How would being more strategic make our churches and organizations more hopeful, better places to work? If the connection is not obvious, look at the following graphic, which shows two churches or organizations. In church A, we see arrows going in all directions. Good people are doing good things, but they are not pulling together. Church B’s arrows are pointing in the same direction. This could be your church or your organization when it is pursuing a more mission-driven pathway. There are big arrows, little arrows, dark arrows, and light arrows—everyone’s individuality is preserved in the model. But the arrows are aligned to achieve mission.



It is a simple graphic, isn’t it? Just arrows. But it shows how an organization

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that has merely been trying hard becomes one capable of moving mountains. The North American Division's Office of Strategy and Research has been chartered to help churches and church organizations transition from one side of the graphic to the other.*

The internal dynamics of becoming mission driven

Jesus used a parable to show us how we excel when we allow God to lead us into His kind of “smartness”: “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps” (Matthew 25:1–4, NKJV).

Do we need oil for our lamps? I believe that as contemporary Adventists, we are being called to stretch ourselves and connect with the harder-to-reach audiences of our times, including the secular men and women in our communities and the better-educated audiences in the church. And I am including those who have left the church, who need an especially compelling witness from us.† It is about wrapping our neighborhood in the kind of loving attention that captures people's imaginations so that they say, “Whatever it is that these Adventist people have, I want it too.” But in addition to what we need to be doing, we also need to understand that our storytelling only makes sense to men and women in our communities when the Holy Spirit has primed them to listen. We are mere tools in God's hands, set aside to achieve His purposes. Here are some things that should shape what we say and do, so that it gives God the pieces of the puzzle He needs.

* The Office of Strategy and Research works with churches, conferences, unions, and the North American Division to help every level in the church become more mission driven, which entails support for better strategic planning and the research showing us both where changes are needed and how they are happening.

† If this is an area that interests you, I would recommend reading Thom and Joani Schultz's book *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013). But the very best book on this topic is John Dickerson's book *The Great Evangelical Recession* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013). Dickerson breaks down in great detail the differences between membership claims and the realities behind them.

1. *Adventist mission smarts begins with engaging with our communities the same way Jesus did.* Jesus' method for reaching people includes a number of characteristic approaches we can learn. Ellen White said: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow me.'" ¹⁴

Some of us have heard the quotation above so many times that our eyes glaze over when somebody refers to it. But when Ellen White introduced this description, she said this is the *only* way we can hope to be successful. It has structure, too, which we will examine in the following paragraphs.

First, she says, Jesus mingled with people. The very idea of mingling makes some of us Adventists nervous. We are OK with ministering to people, by which I mean setting up meetings and inviting people to come into our controlled environment, where we are able to limit our exposure. But mingling is something else entirely. It suggests *we* go where *they* are and hang out with them in casual settings—going to their kid's baseball game, serving on the town council, or cleaning graffiti off downtown buildings. Mingling puts us beyond our comfort zone, which is why I say we may need to stretch ourselves. Mingling is an essential element in our witness that we cannot simply hope somebody else will do. Then Ellen White says Jesus mingled as one who desired their good. People *understood* that Jesus was intent on making their lives better. One of the challenges we face is that our desire to do good sometimes appears to others as a salvation-by-works perspective.

Next, Ellen White says that Jesus *showed* sympathy for people. How do we show sympathy for people? Is it just by *saying* we are sympathetic? She says Jesus "ministered to their needs." He went quickly from mingling to ministering. We know Jesus *fed* people. We know He *healed* people. We know He asked people *personal questions* and used their answers to shape His. We know He told *stories* that caused people to see themselves in new ways. In all these things, we see Jesus' personal engagement with people. When He sat with that woman at the well, He was delivering a powerful message of cultural renewal. When He asked the tax collector to dinner, He

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was breaking cultural tradition. He was setting up a new paradigm for mingling. As Adventists, we have *programs* for ministering, and we pay people to do it in our stead. I suppose that is fine to some extent. But Ellen White is reminding us that Jesus did it *personally*.

Then we see that by doing these things in the way He did, Jesus won people's confidence. Jesus was changing people's minds about Him and His mission—even those who were not exactly sure what He was saying could not doubt that He was getting in the trenches with them and helping them dig. And finally, Jesus said, "Follow Me." This is the discipleship theme again.

2. Adventist mission smarts requires us to tell better true stories, not just defend our policies and practices. Being Adventist mission smart implies that we *understand* the people we are trying to reach and are making a deliberate effort to express our witness in terms that resonate with them, thus supporting the Holy Spirit's efforts to access their hearts. The apostle Paul said, "Let your conversation be always gracious, and never insipid; study how best to talk with each person you meet" (Colossians 4:6).

I have always considered this one of the most strategic passages in the New Testament. First, Paul says, "Let your conversation be always gracious." I would like to be known as someone who is always gracious, but I suspect that there are more than a few people who would come forward to say, "Uh, there are a few less than gracious moments from Dan's life I would like to cite." *Graciousness* indicates that we are generous with others when they stray from the target and quick to forgive when they do something we do not approve of. Paul also wrote: "Show yourselves guileless and above reproach, faultless children of God in a warped and crooked generation, in which you shine like stars in a dark world" (Philippians 2:15). Do you see a pattern here? Paul's counsel is tied to both the integrity we discussed in the introduction and to transparency. It means introducing a positive approach based on grace.

Finally, Paul says, we should "study" how to talk with each person we meet. There are formal and informal ways we can study people. This is where we find the *why* behind what we do. Too often, our better true stories get shoved into the background or are not validated for what they are. Smart mission-driven leaders make better choices.

3. Adventist mission smarts leads to a positive witness featuring hope and wholeness. True Adventist mission smarts—the kind that takes us to a new level of effectiveness—is intentionally positive in character. Choosing to take the high road of hope and wholeness, even when we are being belittled, is vital for the compelling Adventist story. And this is a principled approach based on proven practice, as we are about to see.

Delivering a positive witness has an extended impact. There is a very important school of interpersonal success that focuses on effecting change in organizations through positive ways. This positive-success theme represents the first of two key business insights I want to feature in this chapter. It is called Appreciative Inquiry (AI), and it is the act of recognizing the best in people around us—affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials, and perceiving those things that give health, vitality, and excellence—so that we can transform situations and make successful mission advancement possible.

At its heart, AI is about searching for the best in people, then using it to make them even better. It is not so much a shift in methods or techniques as it is a fundamental shift in the overall perspective from which we imagine things. With AI, we are able to see the wholeness of the human system and begin to feature people's strengths and possibilities, which leads to hope and wholeness.¹⁵

Years ago, I spent a bit of time being trained in the key elements of AI. I learned to lead people through a process of imagining situations in their work history where they experienced moments of excellence. I was then trained to help them use such memories to imagine the brightest possible future.*

This training had a powerful impact on me and has influenced much that I have done since then. I will not attempt to do AI training in these pages, but I want to emphasize how a more positive approach—such as having high expectations of what our members can do—changes things. Most of

* My own exposure to AI began during training led by Jane Magruder Watkins and Ralph Kelly of Appreciative Inquiry Unlimited, in sessions held for Adventist HealthCare in Maryland.

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the important challenges in life are not things that can be fixed but people who can be grown and priorities that can be formed. I would recommend at least four stages of AI, which we will look at in the following paragraphs.

First, we need a discovery phase, where we learn about our people (including what their dreams are). We cannot make progress if we are not willing to address obstacles in strategic ways, of course; but neither do we achieve success merely by removing these challenges. We also need to discover the gifts and the positive contributions our members and employees bring.

Second, we need to begin envisioning the sort of future that seems the most humane to us, with the broadest possibilities. This means asking questions about what is fair and just, rather than merely what might work. It means intentionally embracing other people's dreams because those people have value, even when their dreams do not precisely coincide with ours.

Third, we must begin working to align the organization to our vision of best practices. Issues of alignment seem to pop up in all the new management books because so many of us realize we are not pulling in the same direction. This requires pastors, conference presidents, Adventist hospital administrators, Adventist teachers and school administrators, and leaders of Adventist businesses to choose to prioritize mission over other goals. Mission alignment, when tied to mission awareness and mission accountability, enables us to define useful, strategic steps. We will look at these three elements later, but for now we need to merely acknowledge them as parts of the mix.

Fourth, we work collectively to deliver the changes we believe are the most important. Delivering on effective change in a church or organization is never easy; it almost always has opponents who would rather win than be missional. The idea of working collectively and collaboratively defines the steps we take to achieve greater alignment.

The processes by which we form better habits

Now, as promised, we will turn to the second major management principle for this chapter, a brief overview of organizational habits. We all fall into habitual patterns of behavior, including some that get in the way of progress. What we do to address ingrained habits is how we change culture,

which enables us to mingle with people, be sympathetic, and be committed to meeting their needs simply because they are part of our communities and we care about them.

In order to form better habits, we need to go back to Charles Duhigg, who is a reporter with connections to a number of researchers on the habit-forming process. Duhigg has studied the work being done with various people in many different walks of life and tells us that habits require the formation of a “habit loop.” This habit loop encapsulates the life cycle of habits, including how we form them initially, how we go on to firmly establish them, so that they do not require conscious attention, and how we can exchange less productive habits for better ones. Duhigg’s book *The Power of Habit* is full of fascinating stories of people who were able to form powerful habits that enabled them to achieve at levels ordinary people could not imagine.¹⁶

Researchers tell us that the brain is always looking for ways to save effort. Once it is able to form a habit, it can stop thinking about a particular activity and go on to new things. This is really a three-step loop: a cue, a routine, and a reward. There has to be a trigger (or cue) that starts the process of habit formation, telling your brain to go into automatic mode. Then, once that habit is formed, a physical or mental routine is established, followed by a reward that tells your brain this particular loop is worth remembering for the future. Over time, as it is repeated over and over, the habit loop becomes increasingly automatic, and a persistent habit is formed. Our brains cannot tell the difference between a good habit and a bad one, so the habit will do everything it can to remain in place, lurking in the background, waiting for the cue or trigger to pop up so that the loop can begin again.

It is important to remember that habit loops are essential to life. If we did not have them, the brain would be overwhelmed by minutiae and shut down. Duhigg says: “But since we often do not recognize these habit loops as they grow, we are blind to our ability to control them.”¹⁷

Usually, those who are able to make long-term change join groups of people who believe in the changed behavior, support the individual by taking a personal interest, and staying in that mentor relationship. So getting to better habits is not about church alone; it is about the church that is a true healing community putting its arms around people.

It Is Not Really About Being the Smartest Person in the Room

What did we learn?

What did you take out of this chapter's conversation about Secret 1? What are your personal takeaways? If you are part of a group discussing this book, here are some questions you might want to talk over:

1. Why do you not need to be “the smartest person in the room” to have the ability to lead others into strategic approaches?
2. How does telling better true stories make it more likely that contemporary audiences might give the Seventh-day Adventist Church a chance?
3. How could learning about AI change the culture of your church or organization?
4. If the root of church and organizational success is forming better organizational habits and working to change the bad habits that have already formed, what are some of the habits we need to give up and what are some we need to adopt?

1. Among these are *Good to Great*; *Great by Choice*; *Built to Last*; and *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In*.

2. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 21.

3. Collins, *Good to Great*, 88.

4. George Barna, *Futurecast* (Carol Stream, IL: Barna Books), 198.

5. John Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 22.

6. Julia Duin, *Quitting Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 23.

7. Gordon Pifher, North American Division Strategic Leadership Caucus, Columbia, MD, March 2018.

8. Pierre Omeler, North American Division Strategic Leadership Caucus, Columbia, MD, March 2018.

9. Dickerson, *Evangelical Recession*, 107.

10. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: HarperCollins, 1977).

11. Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 8.

12. Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling, *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* (New York: Free Press, 2016). While the language the authors use is not precisely the same as our mission-driven focus, the concepts in their book will feel very familiar to what you are reading here—and I highly recommend it.

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13. Ellen G. White, “The Cross Incontrovertible Evidence,” *Signs of the Times*, March 7, 1895.

14. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1905), 143.

15. There is a cute and very useful video on AI by Jon Townsin at the AI Commons website: <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/educational-material/appreciative-inquiry-10/>. This video captures well how AI is not a technique but a revolutionary way of thinking about organizational success.

16. Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012).

17. Duhigg, *Power of Habit*, 27.