

# Essentials of Swarming 1: Vision

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# Preface

This reference book is a compilation of material related to the first trait of swarmish organizations: being visionary. Here you'll find some material that I have not previously published on the topic of vision, along with a number of articles previously written on JustinLong.org, all in small convenient package. For each section I will present an initial summary, followed by some collected articles that relate.

# Of Swarms and Corpse Strippers

In the spring of 2006 our family lived in Southeast Asia, where I worked as a missionary researcher. One morning we were going out to run some errands. Our children went out to the car, but then came running back in. They said a gecko was lying, dead, in our drive way. I went out to see: it was a small thing, with a few ants already picking at its corpse. We squatted down to examine it for a few minutes, then left it to go on our errands. I intended to take care of the corpse when we got back.

When we returned, there were more than just a few ants. Several dozen were swarming the corpse. Their quick arrival and steady work fascinated me. We decided to leave the gecko where it was, and see what would happen by the next day.

By morning, the ants had stripped the lizard clean, right down to the bones (and had even carried off more than a few of those). That day I had read Proverbs 6:6: "Go to the ant, O sluggard—learn of its ways and be wise." The words seemed to leap off the page at me. I decided to learn more about ants.

# 1.

I felt the ants and their ways might hold a key to a problem in missions I had been studying for many years. The problem is a simple statement of our seeming inability, for over two thousand years, to complete the Great Commission that Christ gave us to bring the Good News to the whole world, making disciples of every nation. Here is a summary of where we are in missions right now.

- In 1900, the world had 1.6 billion people and there were 0.5 billion Christians.
- By 2000, the world had grown to 6 billion and there were 2 billion Christians.
- By 2050, there will be an estimated 9 billion and 3 billion Christians.

If you do the math, you will see this means Christianity has been stagnant at 33% of the population for the past century, and is likely to remain at 33% through the next 50 years. (This is, admittedly, a broad brushstroke at the global level; in an article at <http://bit.ly/kQe6jF> you can read about the regional realities.)

The number of non-Christians who have access to the Gospel but have not chosen to follow Christ rose steadily from 181 million in 1900 to 825 million by 1970. It then increased sharply as major missionary efforts took place in the 1970s to 1990s: by 2000 there were an estimated 2.3 billion people with access to the Gospel, and researchers estimate this will rise to 3 billion by 2025.

Most importantly: those who live without any access to the Gospel have also grown. From 879 million in 1900, their numbers doubled to 1.6 billion by 1970, then to 1.7 billion by 2000 and likely to 2.2 billion by 2025.

So, the result:

- in 1900, the world was about 50% unevangelized (879 million) and 33% Christian (558 million), with 15,000 cross-cultural missionaries working among the unevangelized

- in 2000, the world was 25% unevangelized and still 33% Christian. However, due to population growth, this means that Christians numbered 2 billion and the unevangelized numbered 1.7 billion.

The percentage of the world that is unevangelized had dropped by half – the good news. But the total number of unevangelized individuals had doubled – the bad news. And even worse, the number of unevangelized was continuing to grow, while the number of Christians (of all traditions) was only barely keeping up with the population of the world.

We do not have enough workers to bring the Good News to the unreached. More workers are needed.

So I worked out an estimate of the total number of workers we needed. I used this formula: one pioneer team of 2 to 3 people works in an unreached area and raises up 100 local ministries, each of which evangelize 1,000 people over the course of 10 years (thus reaching 100,000 people). It's a pretty conservative formula (and I give the rationale at [http://bit.ly/lp\]gwp](http://bit.ly/lp]gwp)). If it holds true, then we need 43,000 such teams now, and by 2050 with population growth we will need 58,000 teams.

If we need 53,000 teams of 2 to 3 people each, then in total we need about 150,000 new workers. This is an enormous number: the equivalent of 30 mission agencies the size of the Southern Baptists' International Mission Board (which raises about \$160 million per year).

How can we mobilize, equip, send, support, and retire this many workers? This question was very much on my mind the morning I considered the ants.

## 2.

Why is this task—mobilizing so many workers—so difficult? A big challenge is the general apathy of Christians toward the missionary task. I will not address this here, as that is more a problem of inspiration. A second challenge which is equally difficult is the simple logistics of organization.

In his book *Here comes everyone*, Clay Shirky explains the Birthday Paradox to help us understand the challenge. This “paradox” is a mathematical formula with this result: in a group of 25 people, there is a 50% chance at least two people will share the same birthday. In a group of 50, the chance rises to 99%.

Shirky explains this is important because we share more than birthdays. We share opinions, too. However, just as not everyone will share the same birthday (perhaps only two or three will), not everyone will share the same opinions. Anyone who tries to get a large group to do something—for example, go to a movie—will soon face this challenge. Some in the group want to go to one movie, and some to another; some want to go in the morning, some in the evening, and so on. The bigger the group, the harder it is to bring all the opinions into agreement.

‘Rich’ organizations (such as companies, large non-governmental organizations, or governments) have one solution. They hire people, paying them money for the right to manage their activities. Workers are organized in hierarchical structures, and told what to do. The salaries, along with other costs (such as cost of materials, and assets like buildings and equipment), together form a ‘red line’ of profitability. Companies undertook projects where the revenue from sales was greater than these costs, and a profit could be had. If costs were greater than revenue, the project was unprofitable and abandoned.

This can work, but we don’t seem to like it very much. We are social creatures, and we are each passionate about different things. We do not like to be managed: told what to do and what to buy. When a cause comes along that we feel passionately about, we will organize ourselves

no matter the cost. This kind of voluntary organization can be seen in historical examples:

- The Mongol armies
- The anti-slavery campaigns in England
- Religious orders like the Jesuits or Franciscans
- Movements like the Jesus Movements of the '60s
- Social protests like the civil rights movements
- Clubs like college fraternities or book reading clubs
- And even Amish barn-raising events.

All of these were organized groups of volunteers who gathered around a shared purpose rather than armies of managed, salaried, commanded employees. To achieve this, the purpose had to be something important and big, something people believed important. It needed charismatic leadership to raise the vision before enough people to attract even small numbers of activists. Financiers were required to pay the bills to do all of this. It was difficult and expensive. But then something happened.

### 3.

## **“I think there is a world market for maybe 5 computers.”**

Before computers were invented, as we saw above, people organized themselves. The invention of the computer, and later the Internet, simply helped. The quote above (attributed to many different people) illustrates how much early users of computers underestimated the value of the computer. At the time, they thought a computer would be used for very big computation problems. Today, we use it far more for sharing and communication.

When the Internet first linked computers together, it grew slowly: from 4 linked computers in 1969 to 213 linked computers in 1981. But in the 1990s, when the Internet moved from its testing sites on university campuses to public availability, the number of users grew very rapidly. In 1995, there were less than 50 million servers connected to the Internet. By 2000, there were over 100 million. Today there are billions of web pages, computers, users, and conversations occurring.

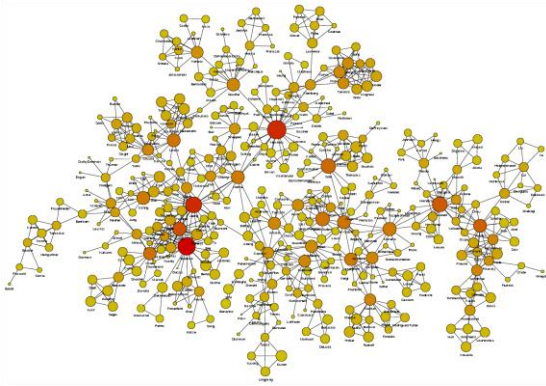
This tells us that doing things together – whether it be talking, sharing, organizing, leading businesses, whatever – is very important to us. Any tool that makes this possible will be used by perhaps millions: and they will often find new uses for sharing that the original tool designers never considered.

Further, since this sharing is so important to us, we spend more and more time and money improving our tools, and the computers we run on them. This leads directly to a principle called ‘Moore’s Law’: that computing power will double every 18 months. At the same time we are shrinking the size of our chips, so that now we can carry substantial ‘sharing power’ in the palm of our hands, in our cell phones.

All of this technological change does two things. First, it dramatically lowers the cost of organization. It makes it easier to maintain a large number of relationships, and to self-organize to do things. Second, in response to the technological changes, we are creating new patterns of

behavior which lead to new forms of organization: ideas like decentralization, cynicism, trust and reputation, crowdsourcing, broad collaboration, and the like.

As a result, we are entering into a transition. We have reached a point where we no longer think of ourselves in terms of hierarchical flow charts, and instead prefer to think of ourselves in terms of relationships.



## 4.

Back to Shirky's argument: when the costs of organizing people falls slightly, two things happen: the biggest corporations get a big bigger (capitalizing on their efficiencies and knowledge), and small, nimble organizations move in to take advantage of new opportunities created by falling costs.

When the costs of organizing people falls catastrophically, something different happens. A new 'space' opens up. There are now activities which no one will pay for – there is no income, no profit, and thus few for-profit companies. At the same time, these activities are so cheap that anyone can do them. Two broadly different examples:

- Few companies would pay an employee to blog about their favorite cats: how to care for them, how to breed them, how to show them. But blogging costs are so low that anyone can.
- No company would pay someone to organize airline passengers who have been in planes stranded on runways. But costs on the Internet are so low that Kate Hanni was able to do exactly this, and gather 10,000 signatures to lobby Congress for a Passenger's Bill of Rights.

Now we have dramatic new possibilities: things no one will pay for, but which can be done because they are cheap enough (virtually free) that people can do them for the love of it. New relationships are possible, because introductions are so easy to achieve. There are dramatic new business and social possibilities, because we are building new tools to enable collaboration. And as we noted before, new organizational structures are possible, because we have created many new behaviors.

## 5.

What does this have to do with missions? It has been very difficult to mobilize large numbers of individuals and teams to reach the unreached. The idea of gathering 50,000 teams would have been laughable a few years ago.

Now it is not a laughing matter: because we no longer need formal organizational structures. Instead, we have the very real possibility of gathering swarms of teams together instead. This book is about building swarms, because I hope that this is exactly what will happen.

In a series of small e-books we will be covering each of the seven traits of swarms:

If you want a swarm:

1. **Be able to clearly articulate your vision** – the bigger picture. If you are at the stage, then also be able to articulate your “plausible promise”: the specific, measurable, agreed-upon, realistic, time-defined goal you are working on, as well as your “shared values” – the things you will do and won’t do to achieve the promise. Lift up Jesus and the vision he has given you, and those who share the vision will be drawn to you.
2. **Provide online spaces for community gathering** before, during, after the meeting – akin to what Lausanne is so spectacularly achieving with the Global Conversation space. A simple e-group or Ning group or wiki or the like would do well. Vision + Community are the primary building blocks.
3. **Empower collaboration.** Start with simple stuff with the primary goal of getting people working together, reading each other’s stuff, interacting, commenting. Then move on up to bigger collaborative projects.

4. **Foster an atmosphere of constant tweaking.** This is really important. Enabling and encouraging people to encourage, charitably critique, and edit each other is key to introducing regular improvements in tools, materials and methods.
5. **Encourage openness.** Get people to be willing to share tools that they have and that they have created. The tools will enable people outside your group to do things to fulfill your promise without even being part of your group. And it will also draw people in.
6. **Struggle for a level of quality that makes your group an influence on other groups.** If you work together in humility, charity, and constant quality improvement, people will look to you to set standards in your particular area.
7. **Be sure to aim for multiplication.** Some people try to grow empires. Don't be like that. Be a group that falls like a seed into the ground, willing to die. Help other people start their own ministries that somehow contribute to the bigger vision.

In this, the first of the books, we will look in detail at the principle of vision: what it is, and five tools that will help you implement it. For each tool I will present an initial description as well as a compilation of some articles I've written about the subject, and some links to additional readings.

# Trait 1: Vision

*Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint... (Proverbs 29:18)*

What drives you? Vision comes from intimacy with Christ and is confirmed in the community of counselors. Pursuing our vision requires us to build the character traits of faithfulness and discernment. Each step on the road toward our vision will confirm our calling. Once a vision is given, we begin pursuing it. In this section we will provide five specific tools.

Here is how Bill Bright related his story to *Christian History*: "About the midnight hour, one night in the final semester of my senior year in seminary, I was studying for a Greek exam with Hugh Brom, a classmate. We were seated at a desk in our living room. There was nothing unusual about the setting or the circumstances. Suddenly, without warning or without indication of what was going to happen, I sensed the presence of God in a way I had never known before. Though it could not have lasted more than a few seconds, I suddenly had the overwhelming impression that the Lord had unfolded a scroll of instructions of what I was to do with my life."

Loren Cunningham, founder of YWAM, told of a similar experience in his book, *Is that really you, God?* He said: "I lay down on the bed, doubled the pillow under my head, and opened the Bible, routinely asking God to speak into my mind. What happened next was far from routine. Suddenly I was looking at a map of the world, only the map was alive and moving! It was a mental movie. I could see all the continents, and waves were crashing onto their shores. Each wave went onto a continent, then receded, then came farther up until it covered the continent completely... as I watched, the scene began to change. The waves became young people--kids my age and younger--covering all the continents of the globe. They were talking to people on street corners and outside bars. They were going from house to house and preaching..."

Both of these examples are kinds of *vision*. Vision is very important to swarmish micro-missions. I have yet to find a swarm that was not driven at its founding by a vision: but I have found different *kinds* of vision. Bright and Cunningham's experiences are examples of the first kind: supernatural *revelation*. Both experienced what we would call a "vision

from God," where they received an instruction or an idea from outside of themselves.

A second kind of vision can be called *resonance*. An example can be found in the world of music. Musicians use a "tuning fork" to tune their instruments. It is a fork-shaped piece of metal that emits the same musical tone, at a precise pitch, every time it is struck. The exact pitch is based upon the length of the fork. If you were to mount two forks near each other, and strike one, the musical note given off from the first fork would vibrate the air around it, which in turn would vibrate the second fork--and the second fork, likewise, would begin emitting its note, just as if it were struck. The second fork *resonates* with the first fork because they both share the same pitch.

One night many years ago, I was working on a computer at a mission agency. I didn't consider myself called to be a missionary: I was just doing a job. While waiting for the computer to finish what it was doing, I grew bored and began idly going through the newsletters in a filing cabinet. Reading these, something inside me leaped up and grabbed my attention. My spirit, controlled by the Holy Spirit, *resonated* with what was on the page in a timeless split second that shaped the rest of my life.

There is a third kind of vision. This is illustrated in the story of a group of MIT students who were briefed on problems in Haiti, and then in 2003 traveled to Haiti to work with Peace Corps volunteers on technological problems related to water quality, school lighting, and cooking fuel shortages (among others). In the course of their class, they were able to create a new, smokeless fuel which could be developed locally: sugarcane charcoal. The entire story can be read at MIT's website (<http://bit.ly/iN5Vb>). As far as we can tell from reading the story, there were no supernatural revelations or Holy Spirit-inspired resonance with the problem. There was only the third kind of vision: our personal vision, a problem seen and rationally understood with our God-given brains. I call this *realization*.

This kind of vision doesn't seem to be any less valid than the other two. Sometimes we seem to think using our brains is a sin, or a lack of faith. God, however, gave us skills, talents, and a mind, and expects us to use them. So, if we lack a vision, perhaps we can start with the parameters God gave us in the Bible. Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 both give us works of the church. If we have nothing specific we are called to do, then we

should look for hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick, oppressed people and do something about it.

When these visions are seen--whether the result of *revelation, resonance, and realization*, they can consume us. They will dominate our daily thoughts. We will bend all of our power to see them fulfilled. *How* we respond will depend in part on three separate factors.

First, our response is determined in part by *who we are*. In his best-selling book, the *Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren presents an acronym, "SHAPE," by which we can consider this: Spiritual giftings, Heart or Passion, Abilities, Personality, and Experiences. There are any number of books, tests, personality inventories, and the like for helping us explore who we are personally. For instance, Erik Rees has written *SHAPE: Finding and fulfilling your unique purpose in life*. The point to be made is that God has *shaped* us uniquely, and our response to a vision we are given is in part determined by what God designed us to do.

Second, our response is determined in part by *who we know*. We are born into relationships and we make more relationships as we live our life. Another mathematical theory has bearing on this: Dunbar's Number. This theory of maximum group size has been popularized in a number of books, of which perhaps the best known is *The Tipping Point*, by Malcolm Gladwell. Christopher Allen, a technologist, has explored the statistics in a variety of online communities and social settings (particularly online games, a multibillion dollar industry), and makes a number of conclusions about optimal group size which we will explore in more depth later. Here it is enough to point out a simple reality: we cannot know everybody. There is a maximum to the number of relationships we can maintain at any given time. We may change relationships from time to time: some friends become more distant, distant friends become closer. Yet there is a limit, and what we can do is partially limited by the constraints of who we know, and who we can mobilize. People who know mostly artists, for example, will have a different response to a vision of poverty than people who know mostly business owners.

Third, our response is determined in part by *who we are not*: our limitations and what we lack. There are things--unique to each of us--that we cannot do. I, for example, cannot fly a plane. This is a skill I lack, and one I am not likely to go after, because I also battle a recurring fear of heights. The things that we cannot do, or cannot do well, will make

certain things impossible. Considering God gives each of us remarkable talents and abilities, I think when responding to a vision that we should seek to maximize our strengths and focus on the things we do well, and avoid options that require things we cannot do easily. This is also one reason why we should aim to recruit people who "complement us": they are not like us, but have skills and talents that we lack. They broaden the strengths of the swarm and make more ministry options possible, without having someone take on something that they cannot do well.

Let us imagine that we hold in our hands a treasure map. We are at one side, and the location of the treasure is on the other. In between us and the treasure, the map shows many obstacles: deserts, mountains, valleys, hostile cities, and so on. Perhaps we can see multiple routes: by sea, over land, by air. The three parameters above will help us to choose the route. In the rest of this chapter, we will look at five specific ways to write out our path, create our plan, and head out in search of the vision.

## **Additional Readings**

- A Case Study in Vision: The Power of Zero  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2010/02/the-power-of-zero-a-compelling-vision/>
- 1 simple, quick way to head toward a vision for your life  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2009/12/1-simple-quick-way-to-head-toward-a-vision-for-your-life/>
- Lofty visions, divine calls and plausible promises are not the same thing  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2009/07/a-promise-is-not-a-call>
- 7 ways community helps vision  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2009/12/7-ways-community-helps-vision/>
- Learning from parallel visions  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2009/11/learning-from-parallel-visions/>
- Malcolm Gladwell: be known for your vision, not your tools  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2010/09/malcolm-gladwell-be-known-for-your-vision-not-your-tools/>

## Principle 1: A Plausible Promise

We begin with the vision: a huge picture of something, a brilliant treasure beckoning in the distance. A common proverb is "to attempt something so big that unless God does it, you're sunk." It always seems like the most powerful visions are actually a convergence of two or three different kinds of vision: a dream, a Holy Spirit-inspired realization of a specific application of the dream, and plenty of "data" to go along with it.

Great as the vision is, they are often simply that: visions. They illuminate the night sky in the distance, like a great light on a distant hill. In our analogy above, the vision is a treasure that we must seek.

But then we must ask: what will we do about the treasure? It may seem like a silly question, but there are in fact any number of things we might do. We might set out in search of the treasure ourselves. We might attempt to sell the map. We might decide this particular treasure is better left untouched: and so bury or destroy the map. There are nearly always multiple things we can do about the treasured vision.

In 1956, Loren Cunningham experienced his supernatural vision of waves of youth. Four years later, he and his wife had successfully created a new kind of mission organization whose goal was to send young people out on short-term mission trips after high school to gain a sense of purpose. It was called "Youth With a Mission." Cunningham had created a *process* which he *franchised* out all over the world.

In 1991, a young student named Linus Torvalds posted a note on an electronic group announcing he had developed a simple computer operating system that he was offering for free download. He invited people to use it, fix it, and extend it. They did--first just a few, and then hundreds--until today "Linux" has become one of the most popular operating systems in the world, driving a multi-billion dollar economy and the birth of the open source movement. An easy and humorous read of the history of Linux can be found at <http://bit.ly/igUURP>. Torvalds had created a *product* which he gave away for free, encouraging the

creation of a large group to extend it (which eventually became a movement).

In 1992, having witnessed the horrendous effects of landmines, six non-governmental organizations came together to seek a solution. They realized the only answer was a comprehensive and complete ban. Together, they created the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. It was a small office which ran a decentralized campaign resulting in the Mine Ban Treaty of September 1997. A history of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines is at <http://bit.ly/isn31m>. The ICBL created a small office with a big goal.

This past summer, we told our four children that we were going to travel to Nina & Papa's house and spend a few months visiting our family in the north while we were on missionary home leave in the United States. Our children had "visions" of what this visit would be like: seeing their cousins, their grandparents, perhaps going apple picking, perhaps going into the country side. They focused entirely on the idea of "Minnesota." We, as parents, knew that to arrive at this "vision" required actually traveling there. Would we drive? Would we fly? In the end, we opted to drive: which meant traveling in a van over highways for 24 hours from Virginia to Minnesota. It meant packing food, and items to entertain the children. It meant planning for rest stops, eating, and times when any one or all of us might be grumpy and complaining about the length of the trip.

Micro-missions are inspired by a vision, yet they driven by the choice they make about what they will do. They articulate this choice as a statement or product that is specific and measurable. That "statement" is what I call a *plausible promise*.

Eric Raymond, an open source social theorist, coined this phrase in his essay, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar," which documented differences in how software was developed by big corporations (such as Microsoft) and open source movements. He wrote (<http://bit.ly/jjLfxd>):

When you start community-building, what you need to be able to present is a *plausible promise*. Your program doesn't have to work particularly well. It can be crude, buggy, incomplete and poorly documented. What it must not fail to do is (a) run, and (b)

convince potential co-developers that it can be evolved into something really neat in the foreseeable future.

The Linux operating system was in itself a plausible promise. So is YWAM: because YWAM itself is a process, not an organization. Cunningham started the first base, not YWAM as an organization. Unlike the International Mission Board or even Campus Crusade, YWAM does not exist as a central organization. There is no charitable organization or NGO of which all bases are members. Each base is its own organization: some are legally registered, and some have no registration at all. They are connected to each other through shared values and relationships. The YWAM Base is a "plausible promise": like a computer program, it might indeed be crude, buggy, incomplete or poorly documented--but it can (a) run and (b) become something neat.

Swarmish micro-missions always begin this way: with an "answer" to the "problem" defined by their vision. A mission might be concerned with the unreached in the whole world, but their "promise" is to the unreached in a specific area. Or, their promise might be to help people who are helping the unreached: the Viva Network, for example, has a vision of reaching children but a promise of helping people who are helping children. Lausanne has a vision of world evangelization but in practice is a forum of people who are involved in world evangelization.

To draft a plausible promise, consider a goal which fits the acronym "SMARTER". The earliest record of this system was probably by Peter Drucker (something like it is in his *The Practice of Management*, from 1954). SMARTER typically means: Specific, Measurable, Agreed-upon, Realistic, Timed, Exciting, and Reassessed (although different people have used slightly different terms for each of the letters).

*A plausible promise is specific.* A functional computer operating system, a Discipleship Training School, an Internet Evangelism Toolbox, a pledge to missionary service, a trip to Nina & Papa's on a specific date--all of these are specific kinds of things. Some promises may be specific products (like a book), while others may be specific process. YWAM falls more into this latter category: it is a process for sending youth on a short-term trip to find a sense of purpose and help fulfill the Great Commission.

*A plausible promise is measurable.* You should be able to know when you have fulfilled the promise. Based on the promise, you should be able to write specific goals and milestones. Before leaving on our trip, I printed out directions and we put a map book in the car. Along the way, we pointed out signs to our children as we entered a new state: "Welcome to West Virginia, 5 states left!" In the morning when our children woke after sleeping through the night in the car, they asked, "What state are we in? How many states are left?"

*A plausible promise is agreed upon.* It must be something around which a core of people can unite. If you can't find anyone to agree with you, then it is not plausible. My wife and I had to agree to share the driving and to help the other person stay awake when necessary. People will have to agree not only that the promise is doable, but that they will do it.

*A plausible promise is realistic.* It has to be something you can really do. Generally, if it is specific, measurable and agreed-upon, then it will be. Not everyone in the world, or even in your relational network, has to agree that the promise is realistic: but enough people have to agree to build a team.

*A plausible promise is time-bound.* It has a deadline. We knew we would leave on our trip at a specific date and time, and so we could tell how far in advance we needed to do things to prepare for the trip. Later, we'll see how this deadline is used as a measure of appropriate speed: if *Teachable Behaviors* are too slow to reach the deadline, then they need *Continuous Improvement*.

*A plausible promise is exciting.* It has to be something that gets people motivated, and willing to act. This doesn't mean that the people involved have to be highly magnetic personalities. The goal itself has to be something that interests people.

*A plausible promise is reassessed.* When the plausible promise is reached, then it needs to be reassessed in light of the overall vision. Some promises, once reached, lead to the disbanding of the swarm. In other cases, a promise reached may simply be discovered to be a "first stage" in a longer journey. Remember that the vision is often bigger than the person, or the organization. When one promise is fulfilled, another promise may be made as you walk toward the vision.

With a plausible promise in hand, the swarm knows what it is going to do about the vision. The next question is: what must it be to get to the finish line?

## Case Studies & Examples

- Linux: see *The cathedral & the bazaar*, by Eric Raymond or <http://bit.ly/fINT18>.
- The plausible promise of an insurgency: see Global Guerrillas at <http://bit.ly/eGyd72>.
- What is the plausible promise of YWAM? (see <http://www.ywam.org>).
- International Campaign to Ban Landmines. See <http://bit.ly/gQpiOt>.
- Woolman, Wilberforce: to abolish slavery.
- “United Methodism in 1,2,3,4,5” is a great short post describing the “plausible promise” and values (short, simple rules) of a denomination. Most denominations are very swarmish. <http://bit.ly/101eME>.
- The environmental movement may have its plausible promise: 350 (as in carbon parts per million). <http://bit.ly/nap9l>.

## Additional Readings

- Aim for the wrong things, get to the wrong place <http://www.justinlong.org/2010/07/aim-for-the-wrong-things-get-to-the-wrong-place/>
- The difference between an impossible goal and a plausible promise <http://www.justinlong.org/2010/02/the-difference-between-an-impossible-goal-and-a-plausible-promise/>
- How a promise can cut through global clutter <http://www.justinlong.org/2009/07/how-a-promise-can-cut-through-global-clutter/>
- The Plausible Promise, the Definition of Success, and Avoiding Disappointment <http://www.justinlong.org/2009/08/the-plausible-promise-the-definition-of-success-and-avoiding-disappointment/>

- Godin, Seth. *Unleashing the ideavirus*. Dobbs Ferry, NY: Do You Zoom, Inc. (2000). Download a free copy from <http://www.ideavirus.com>.
- Raymond, Eric. The Cathedral and the Bazaar. One of the first articulations of the idea of a plausible promise, in the context of the open source movement. <http://bit.ly/9VJdou>.
- [Katya's Non-Profit Marketing Blog](#) has a short blurb on a post by Seth Godin plus compare and contrast of 100 million homeless compared to 1 homeless person. This is why the plausible promise (vs. a big overarching vision) is so critical. <http://bit.ly/3XLUu>.
- Google CEO Eric Schmidt says his company's promise is not search. It's to do things that matter to the world at large scale. <http://bit.ly/DLyaf>.
- This Wikipedia article gives a brief overview of a "SMART goal" (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Bound): <http://bit.ly/dkvZau>.
- A 4 minute Youtube video explores how to set SMART goals in great detail: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uThBb3kGf4k>.
- The fallacy of the great idea by Trevor Ginn explores the peril of waiting until you have a "great idea": "starting up with a tried and tested concept is very sensible. The real key to success is focus and brilliant execution." Your plausible promise does not necessarily have to be something completely new. <http://bit.ly/91Cp9e>.
- [Seth's Blog: Little lies and small promises](#). "Not a true statement because it's a promise not meant to be kept." [Plausible promises](#) are meant to be kept—they are not goals meant to be broken. Are you keeping your promises? Did you ever intend to? What specific steps are you taking so that your good intentions aren't [paving a road to a very hot place](#)?
- [Lifehacker](#) points to Paul Graham's [The Top Idea in Your Mind](#). "...the idea one thinks about when allowed to think freely — in the shower, for example — is more than a quiet obsession... a top idea in your head is getting all kinds of free, enthusiastic thinking that other ideas aren't getting." Graham goes on to talk about priorities and non-priorities, but the point I'd like to make here is that the "top idea" is a good indicator of what your vision or

passion is. If you want to find out what God's gifted you to do, one way might be to get away into solitude where you can have "free, enthusiastic thinking" – and see where it takes you. (You may have to practice a little of the Spirit's fruit of self-discipline, but good top ideas could lead you toward your calling/vision.)

- <http://bit.ly/cje9Zg> – Lee Grady (Charisma) inspires us that God guards the promises He has made to us. Let Him take care of the vision; you obey.
- How to present your plausible promise,  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2009/06/how-to-present-your-plausible-promise/>

## Principle 2: Guiding Values

On a brilliant morning twelve years after my visionary night with the file cabinets, I was working on a website in my office, uploading files, when abruptly my access to the Internet died. I could not figure out what had happened: one minute I was transferring several articles to the website, and the next minute I had no Internet access at all.

I began poking around with my connection, trying to figure out what if something was wrong on my end or at the server, which was located in Colorado. I decided to do a quick test of the connection and sent my browser to CNN's website. It was not reachable either. Several major websites were unavailable. It wasn't our server, I decided--it was out connection to the Internet. But, oddly, e-mail still worked.

I was debating calling our service provider when a colleague called into our offices. A plane had hit the World Trade Center in New York. On that September morning, with a bright blue sky outside our windows and yellow sunlight pouring in, we watched on a television as a second plane dived into the other tower, and we knew our world had changed forever.

Al Qaeda is a classic example of a swarm. When it was first formed, it was intended to be a sort of "SEAL team" for Muslims who were in danger. This was in the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

When Bin Laden rose to its leadership, he reorganized it an army, with training bases in Afghanistan and recruiting centers near radical mosques all over the world. However, of all those trained by Al Qaeda at its camps, only the best 10% were kept. The rest were seeded into radical groups throughout the world.

Later, when Al Qaeda switched its emphasis to largely vision casting due to attacks and pursuit by the Clinton Administration, it was able to do so because of its relational links to many like-minded organizations through its alumni.

Nothing we have discussed so far about swarmish organizations has dealt with ethics or the morality of a group. Realistically, swarms are forming all the time, and they are not all groups we would agree with. Clay Shirky recounts support groups organized for girls who seek anorexia—groups to *help* them in this quest, not keep them from it. Likewise, there are groups for young people who cut themselves—and these are not prevention groups. Most religious groups are in fact very "swarmish": whether they be Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Wiccan. Criminal groups are swarmish, as are terrorists.

In our first analogy of the vision as a treasure, we could be any one of a number of different characters in order to obtain it. We might be soldiers of an empire sent to recover it. We might be treasure-hunters and adventurers, equipped and funded by a mysterious rich businessman in exchange for a share in the find. We might be bloodthirsty, violent pirates willing to kill anyone who stands in our way. We might be academics or scholars seeking the treasure for its purely historical value. Who we are, who we decide to be, is a choice of character.

YWAM, like Al Qaeda, is a classic swarm, with decentralized bases and hundreds of thousands of alumni now working in other organizations. So are other mission organizations such as WEC and Wycliffe. Most denominations are swarmish: the Baptists are the most obvious example. What September 11th demonstrated—as do many of these other examples—is that the swarmish structure is amoral. Its character is determined by *Shared Values* of the members.

*Shared Values can be a small, easily remembered list.* We're not talking about moral laws that are binding on all organizations, but rather the giftings or emphases that define a group. Like fence posts, these simple statements define the path that we take to the promise — *this* path, not *that* path, and because we share these values and directions, we go together. These values can also be considered the things that make us *distinct*, or different from other groups.

*Shared values are, of course, shared.* They are things that everyone in the group agree with — and that must generally be agreed with by anyone who might join the group. We look for recruits who share not just our promise but also our values. Those who share our promise but *not* our values are people who can be cooperated with (perhaps) but who really can't be part of the swarm itself. Also, because shared values are shared,

we can look in places that share our values for people who share our promise. Finally, those who no longer share the values will generally self-remove themselves from the group.

*Shared values are holistic.* They will influence every aspect of the group. They will determine how we recruit and who we recruit. They will influence the kind of community structure that we build. They will impact the methods we use to collaborate together with each other and with outsiders. Finally, they can influence how, and how rapidly, we multiply.

*Shared values are relevant.* They are related to the plausible promise itself, and affect how it is fulfilled. They will define categories of action, and can be used to identify new teachable behaviors to fulfill the promise. "We do not lie" is an excellent rule – but it might or might not be a *relevant* shared value.

*Shared values determine accountability.* They are what we hold ourselves accountable to, either for the kinds of actions we take or for the fact that we are not acting. Shared values generally help us define our measurements, and are easily observable. It's one thing to measure how much we are doing, and how fast – but shared values tell us whether we are doing the *right* things.

These values are often few and very simply stated. They are identified during the very early stages of a swarm's creation. This period can be particularly unstable, particularly if there are many people involved, precisely because there will be some initial uncertainty both over the plausible promise and the shared values. The visions that bring people together initially will be similar--and yet different. My vision of the problem of unreached peoples is different than those of my friends who are equally passionate about the cause of missions. Thus our personal plausible promises and our values will be a bit different.

To gain stability requires much listening, sharing, and talking to come to a consensus. Consensus does not mean "majority rules" but rather "unanimous agreement." Part of this process will be to make the plausible promise and the values general enough that all who are willing to agree can, while not so general as to be useless. Some people may walk away from the swarm: and that is acceptable. They may start

"parallel" swarms with whom you can interact (and this possibility will be discussed in the last chapter).

## Case Studies & Examples

- The “12 distinctives of Action International Ministries,” online in a Google Document at <http://bit.ly/b1Ales>, are a good example of simple “ground rules” and the reasons for them.
- The “Foundational Values of Youth With a Mission” can be seen at <http://bit.ly/aIs7zY>. Note how the five basic values yield 17 elements of YWAM’s “DNA”.
- The Core Values of WEC International (<http://bit.ly/cmVKDL>) lead to ten specific “convictions” which are similar to the DNA of YWAM.
- Recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous all have easily duplicated, simply-stated rules.
- During the WTO protests, all groups were required to sign on to a basic set of principles for just that day, even if they did not typically agree with them (e.g. no weapons, no drugs, no alcohol, etc).
- “Ten Things”: the ten corporate values of Google.

## Additional Readings

- Swarming ends, means, methods: the difference  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2009/10/swarming-ends-means-methods-the-difference/>
- Case Study: Shared Values, Teachable Behaviors  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2009/02/case-study-shared-values-teachable-behaviors/>

## Principle 3: Teachable Behaviors

The vision is the ultimate desire. The promise is what we are presently doing on behalf of the vision: the finish line, with a known "direction" and "distance." The values prescribe the character of the group and the kinds of things it will or will not do in order to reach the finish.

All that remains is to begin walking down the path, heading *toward* the plausible promise at a *speed* that will get us there before the deadline. How do we travel down the path? What methods do we use? Do we, for example, walk, or ride horseback, or on bicycles, or on motorcycles, or cars, trains, buses, planes? The specific ways we use to go down the path are *Teachable Behaviors*.

If we were seeking treasure, we might have a number of teachable behaviors: like Recruiting Crewmembers, Keeping Secrets, Avoiding Pirates, Keeping the Crew Happy, Sailing A Ship, Scrubbing The Deck, Cooking Food, Reading Treasure Maps, Digging Up Treasure, and Returning Safely Home.

Teachable Behaviors are more complex than the Promise or the Values. They can become a toolbox for use by the members. What do these kinds of behaviors have in common?

*They are standardized.* They are observed, written down, and documented so anyone can reproduce them. The "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous explains in detail the Twelve Steps, as well as how to hold a meeting. A YWAM Discipleship Training School can be described so that any base can run one.

*They can be repeated.* For maximum speed in the swarm, Teachable Behaviors are things anyone can do, at any time, without getting permission from anyone else, and without any special skills. Youtube.com has launched a "Reporter's Center" to enable would-be citizen journalists to learn how to better report news. These skills can be used by any blogger, at any time, without permission.

*They can be taught.* Consider the member of Alcoholics Anonymous who has successfully become sober using the Twelve Step method. He or she teaches the same method to someone else, who can now do the same thing. This is a powerful way for swarms to extend their influence without needing money or special skills that require costly training.

*They can scale.* Teachable Behaviors must be able to be performed in large numbers: thus, not requiring significant resources. The more resources required for a specific behavior, the slower it will grow. Anyone can be taught to start and maintain a web-based blog, and this behavior can be rapidly implemented, because it is so inexpensive. Learning how to start a ministry that loans money to microenterprises to alleviate poverty is more difficult, because it requires money to lend. In addition, behaviors that have scaling benefits are especially useful. We will cover this later on, but there are some kinds of behaviors which are more powerful when done in large numbers.

*They are measurable.* Every behavior can be reported and measured. This is important for measuring a swarm's speed and direction, in order to determine how to improve.

Once these behaviors have been documented, they can be shared with others. A church, for example, could document a dozen or more specific kinds of outreach that a small group could do in a neighborhood, ranging from the very simple (prayerwalking) to the very complex (holding a neighborhood block party for a holiday). As new small groups form in the church, these behaviors can be passed on, taught, modeled, and implemented.

Fortunately, many teachable behaviors can be exchanged even between different kinds of ministries. For example, a campus ministry in New York might be able to benefit from some of the behaviors developed by a YWAM base in Africa. However, anyone "collecting" teachable behaviors will soon begin building more complex and contextually relevant "processes" using these behaviors. It is to this idea that we turn next.

## **Case Studies & Examples**

- Alcoholics Anonymous has "the big book" which teaches the behaviors for recovery. <http://www.aa.org/bibgbookonline>.

- Youtube.com's Reporter Center teaches citizen journalists how to better report the news. <http://www.youtube.com/reporterscenter>.
- Four Spiritual Laws: anyone could be trained to share the Gospel using this tool.
- Khan Academy: in simple 15-minute videos any mathematical concept can be taught, <http://www.khanacademy.org>.
- Illustrating problems using pictures: Dan Roam in *The back of the napkin*.
- Before the anti-WTO protests in Seattle, protestors attended classes on non-violent protests.
- Political campaigns feature numerous teachable behaviors, as illustrated at the Political Resource Library, <http://bit.ly/dGyXd>.

## Additional Readings

- The importance of Teachable Behaviors  
<http://www.justinlong.org/2011/04/the-importance-of-teachable-behaviors/>
- <http://bit.ly/cnhFzL> - The methods of Alcoholics Anonymous (a highly swarmish organization) are shown in this study to have enormous stickiness if a person perseveres in the program for at least one year. It takes that long, apparently, to impart the values and behaviors.

## **Principle 4: Repeatable Processes**

Attempting to plan very far in advance can lead to disaster. A common proverb in military circles is: "No plan survives first contact with the enemy." It refers to the oft-cited situation where a military commander carefully creates a plan and begins to implement it in battle--and actions on the part of his enemy shatters the plan. In James 4:13-15, we are told:

Look here, you people who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit." How do you know what will happen tomorrow? For your life is like the morning fog--it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that." Otherwise you will be boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil.

How can we develop workable plans that tell people what we are going to do, when such plans can be broken by unforeseen circumstances and we are told that boasting about our plans is evil? Repeatable Processes are one solution to this problem.

Once upon a time a year or so ago, I had the idea--at the time, I thought it was brilliant--to create a computer program which would download news items from a number of different websites, collect them together, and let me select which ones were of interest to me. The program would "learn" from my choices and in the future prioritize news articles which were most like the ones I had already chosen. In the early stages it likely would have gotten a lot of things wrong--news, after all, changes over time, and it's difficult to predict what would be useful. In the long run, though, I thought it would probably learn not just the events I was interested in, but the kinds of events--the topics, if you will--and get quite good.

This is a challenging program with many steps to write. One of the first steps was to enable the program to download news items from other websites. Fortunately there is a standard used by many news-oriented

websites and blogs, called RSS. The acronym stands for Really Simple Syndication, but despite its name it is not simple. RSS feeds are text files of headlines and web links in a specific and somewhat complex format. If "easy" is making a cup of coffee, then using these feeds is not "easy" at all. It could be done but it would take time.

Fortunately, I did not have to write the software to read these files. I usually write programs in a language called PHP, as do thousands of other programmers in the world. PHP is part of the "open source movement," and one *Shared Value* of this movement is to share what you have done. Many programmers create useful "libraries": like books of programs, already written and available for use. I was able to find a library, freely available, of programming code for reading RSS feeds. I did not have to write all that software from scratch: something that would have probably taken me many hours of writing, checking, fixing errors, and the like.

Instead, I could use the library and get on with the real business of writing the program that would analyze my choices and learn from it. I quickly got stuck and decided it might not be worth the time after all. Because I had access to that library, I only spent a couple of hours on the project, as opposed to many.

Behaviors, once identified and practiced, can be linked together in patterns to form *Repeatable Processes*. A strategy is like this "library" of programming code. It is designed, tested, and known to work. It can be shared with others, who can adapt and use it to their own situations.

*Repeatable processes are made up of patterns of behaviors.* Because we use existing, known behaviors, the time it takes to learn a process is reduced. What we are doing is organizing a series of behaviors into specific patterns or "loops" that accomplish a larger goal. In doing this, we are focused in *processes* rather than one-time events: these processes can be done whenever it's appropriate.

*Repeatable processes are contextualized to the situation.* The patterns can be translated into local languages or dialects or cultural methods of speech or relationship. They can be adapted to fit into local situations and contexts. They can be made to fit periods of demand or seasonal requirements. They can be tweaked, changed, and modified.

*Repeatable processes can be “synergistic.”* This simple means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The individual behaviors in a pattern can “feed” off each other and reach greater heights of effectiveness. You might recruit someone face to face or via social networks or via mass advertising. But when you put all three together you might find that they become more effective *together* than they were *separately*.

*Repeatable processes are measurable.* Because the behaviors themselves can be measured, the processes can be measured. Because the behaviors can be observed, the processes too can be observed and easily debugged. Finally, patterns repeated in different contexts can also yield different results that can be studied based on variations in the context.

There are several benefits to an approach that makes the most of Repeatable Processes. First, you can save someone time by offering a strategy for reuse. If it is a good strategy and people find it works well, with few problems, then it will probably be widely redistributed.

Second, a Process approach enables you to do some planning while also being able to respond to opportunities. A YWAM base might have access to several different strategies: a Discipleship Training School, a disaster-relief strategy, a general street outreach strategy, a holiday outreach strategy, and so on. They can plan for several DTS events, as well as holiday strategies around times like Christmas and Easter. However, if, in response to needs identified in prayer and through watching the community around them, they see an opportunity, they can decide to activate a special outreach strategy. If an event like a disaster occurs, they can immediately pull out a disaster-relief strategy to deal with it.

By evaluating Repeatable Processes early and building a collection of processes known to advance the goals of the swarm, a swarm need not stop to ponder what it will do when faced with an opportunity. If the swarm has a process for dealing with the situation, it activates it; otherwise, it ignores the event entirely and continues with its normal behavior.

Processes can be used *in response* to any opportunity *because* the swarm already knows the process--which is made up simply of behaviors that advance the Plausible Promise--will help the swarm achieve its goals. Processes are a great way of dealing with the need for permission (which

we will talk about later on): they can be activated by any member of the swarm, and other members will join in.

## **Case Studies & Examples**

- Any of the YWAM Schools (e.g. a Discipleship Training School) is a repeatable process that incorporates a number of behaviors and can be done in a variety of contexts.
- An Alcoholics Anonymous meeting is a repeatable process that can be adapted to a number of different settings.
- A Discovery Bible Study (a simple house church meeting) is a repeatable process that can easily be adapted to either literate or illiterate societies.

## Principle 5: Measurable Milestones

In 1988, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative launched with the goal of completely eradicating polio worldwide. By 2002, a 99% reduction in polio had been achieved. The initiative carefully tracks incidents of polio and maintains a list of countries to be targeted for vaccination campaigns.

In September 2000, world leaders came together at the United Nations headquarters in New York and adopted the UN Millennium Declaration, committing themselves to among other things "new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty." Out of this came a series of time-bound goals, with a deadline of 2015, that became known as the Millennium Development Goals (see <http://bit.ly/PXi2>).

These are examples of *Measurable Milestones*, which are the final key to increasing the focus of a swarm. Since the plausible promise of a swarm is intended to be measurable, the obvious next step is to define measurements, and to monitor them.

*A measurable milestone is a challenge.* "No team arises without a meaningful challenge; chemistry or desire lead to team values but not to team work," we read in *The Wisdom of Teams*. We should build a performance ethic, rather than simply building teams for the sake of teams. To be challenging, milestones must be demanding, precise, realistic and shared — just as the plausible promise is.

*A measurable milestone is a marker.* It is established for the benefit of those on the path to the promise. It tells you where you are, revealing your current position in relation to both the goal and the past. It is a reminder and an encouragement, telling you how far you have come. However, it's also a performance standard, and possibly a warning: because it lets you know how well you are doing compared to the goal.

*A measurable milestone allows for intermediate course correction.* It gives you the "next point" to aim for. This allows you to make minor course

corrections if needed, but also lets you judge your distance and speed (how fast you're reaching the milestones) and allows for a reality check. Changing conditions can make reaching the goal impossible on your current path—and that's when deep change is needed. Fortunately, multiple milestones can make alternative paths (around blockages) visible.

We have mentioned before how measurements can help a swarm determine its location, speed and direction relative to the promise. As an example, YWAM articulated a goal (or a vision) of growing from 20,000 full-time staff to 200,000 full-time staff in 25 years. One can simply measure the growth in staffers on a per year basis to determine the location, speed and direction of YWAM in relation to that goal. On average, YWAM would need to add an additional 7,000 members per year (not taking into account exponential growth) to reach this goal. In 2007, the website indicated they had roughly 17,000 members. Today, they should have over 30,000 members: if they do not, then *it would seem* they are not on track.

This statement may seem judgmental. It is not intended to be. (I have many friends in YWAM and highly respect the organization.) Yet we have to be able to make these kinds of measurements and ask ourselves what they mean. We can look at the YWAM website and clearly see reaching 200,000 members is more of a dream than a particular goal. Progress is not measured in the same hard and fast way that the Millennial Development Goals are measured and plastered all over UN websites (and note that the UN is not presently going to reach its goals, either). One page of the YWAM website says they have under 16,000 members, and another says 17,000.

If this were a hard goal, YWAM would know for any given year how many members they have worldwide: it would be measured as a milestone. Then they could make a simple analysis: we have not recruited and/or retained enough people. "We are not moving fast enough," or (if they are actually losing members), "we are moving in the wrong direction." They would revisit behaviors related to recruitment and member care to identify ways in which speed could be improved.

The point is not to say YWAM—or any organization with measurable milestones—must be judged. The point is: what we measure, we can improve in measurable and specific ways. John E. Jones wrote, "What

gets measured gets done, what gets measured and fed back gets done well, and what gets rewarded gets repeated.”

However, mathematical numeracy is especially required when dealing with measurable milestones. Because some behaviors can get more powerful as more people do them, swarms can discover they are benefiting from exponential growth.

In other words, YWAM's recruitment might be *slow at first* and *faster later on*. We do not want to claim this when it is not happening, but it is something to look for when measuring milestones: progress that gets faster as you grow in size. If it happens (and it does quite often with swarms) then you can chart this as exponential growth and you may find you arrive at the goal either early or right on time.

## Case Studies & Examples

- Status of Global Mission: measures the growth of Christianity and the progress of mission from 1800-2050, <http://bit.ly/9QxPe>.
- Millennial Development Goals: measures 6 categories of development worldwide, UN: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>
- YWAM: 1,000 people group adoptions by AD 2000 (<http://bit.ly/4wxkYZ>)

## Additional Readings

- No assessment may be better than a bad one <http://www.justinlong.org/2010/03/no-assessment-may-be-better-than-a-bad-one/>

## In Summary

Why is vision important? Organizations centered around a person can fracture when the person goes away (which can happen in the case of resignation, retirement, failure, or death). Organizations centered around money can fracture if their income stream is lost.

Vision endures: through riches or poverty, through this leader and that. When people agree on a vision, they can carry it forward and pass it on to future generations. Charismatic people can help in this process, as can money--but even without these, the organization can live on.

Remaining focused on the goal will keep a swarm moving forward. The next key is to move forward *together*, in order to endure. We turn to the topic of community in the next guidebook.

## **Some Swarming Case Studies: A Dozen Case Studies or So**

- Alcoholics Anonymous. A decentralized organization: anyone can set up a chapter, which follows a standard meeting format in order to accomplish a shared plausible promise (The Starfish and the Spider).
- Apache Indians in the United States. A decentralized state which could not be conquered by the hierarchical armies under the Spanish (The Starfish and the Spider).
- Illinois Tool Works. A global group of 650 decentralized business units in 45 countries employing 49,000 workers in a highly decentralized fashion. <http://tinyurl.com/2nxzzv>
- Pagan groups organize New Orleans cleanup. How the same pagan group that helped shut down the World Trade Organization conference in 1999 organized garbage clean up in New Orleans' Ninth Ward. <http://tinyurl.com/ysjpef>
- Toyota. The manufacturer uses swarming techniques to become one of the top four automakers in the world:
- The Serb project Radio B-92
- The Zapatista war in Mexico
- Asian triads
- Hamas
- American Christian Patriot Movement
- Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Human Rights
- Internet. The classic example: the online network of networks uses decentralized leadership and swarming techniques to deliver trillions of pieces of data every day.
- Peer-to-peer filesharing. The many varied decentralized networks distribute digital copies of music and video files, including illegal pirated forms, and have yet to be shut down by the music and film industries despite massive financial losses.
- Animal Liberation Front. A group of animal rights protestors in the United States uses swarming techniques to connect, organize, and execute attacks on labs.

- Skype. Peer-to-peer communication software uses swarming techniques to provide free secure voice calling over the Internet.
- Celtic missionary movement. The monasteries associated with the Celts rapidly multiplied all across Ireland, and then into Europe, and were largely responsible for refarming Europe after the devastation of war and disease.
- Wikipedia. This online encyclopedia uses swarming techniques to enable anyone to edit any page, and to collaboratively build up one of the largest collections of knowledge in the world.
- Many US political campaigns, including especially the Obama for President campaign.
- Mission agencies: YWAM, WEC, Wycliffe and others.
- The Southern Baptist Convention (but not necessarily the International Mission Board).

# YWAM

Think swarms can't work in missions? Think again. There are swarms all around us. Youth With a Mission is a classic example, and the easiest because lots of people wonder whether YWAM has any structure at all. It does, clearly - but only if you think of it in swarmish terms. Let's break it down:

## **Swarms are visionary**

1. Plausible Promise: "To know God and make Him known."
2. Shared Values: Worship, Holiness, Witness, Prayer and Fellowship. (In addition, these foundational values when combined with YWAM's Beliefs lead to 17 "core values": know God, make God known, hear God's voice, practice worship and intercessory prayer, be visionary, champion young people, be broad-structured and decentralized, be international and interdenominational, have a Biblical worldview, function in teams, exhibit servant leadership, do first then teach, be relationship-oriented, value the individual, value the family, rely on relationship-based support, and practice hospitality - see <http://ywam-mn.org/values.html>).
3. Teachable Behaviors: All bases, courses, and ministries use similar methodologies that can be taught and replicated: for example, consider the standardization of DTS, SOFM, SOE, etc.
4. Repeatable Processes: Every base builds its own ministry strategy based around the standardized methodologies. When a base recruits a new worker, they come already infused with the YWAM DNA and can easily pick up the strategy because it's just a "restacking" of existing YWAM values and behaviors.
5. Measurable Milestones: This is one area where YWAM seems a little weak at times, as their plans tend not to be publicly communicated very well (try finding them on a website). Nevertheless there *are* plans (such as 4K etc).

## **Swarms are Community-Based**

6. Open Membership: becoming a member of YWAM is a fairly straight forward process. You have to have a pastoral reference and you have to go through a DTS. My personal belief is that YWAM should have an “affiliate membership” for people with existing independent ministries that don’t need the basic discipleship in DTS but could profitably ally with YWAM – call this an “ATS” or Associates Training School to inculcate the YWAM DNA.

7. Simple Networks. YWAM is a remarkably flat organization, with a high degree of representation. It may seem from the outside that there is no structure but there clearly is. Every YWAM base within a country is formed with the approval/blessing/support of the national leadership, and all base leaders become part of the national leadership. National leaderships in turn make up Regional leadership; regional leadership in turn makes up Global leadership. Bases are made up of leaders of the individual members on base. The emphasis here is not on “rank” because YWAM is a volunteer organization.

On a **highly important** side note: \*no\* finances flow through YWAM to an individual. Individual YWAM members have to have a 501c3 covering – like a church – to collect their donations. So far as I can detect as an outside observer, YWAM has no financial interest in its individual members (aside from the fact that all members of a YWAM base pay a share of the base expenses in order to support the base’s assets etc – thus bases do not do much (any?) fundraising for the base, and are not in competition for donor dollars). YWAM Bases have only the amount of structure that is needed and paid for by their members.

8. Heart Language: YWAM contextualizes all of its tools into local situations and local languages.

9. Frequent Communication: I don’t know how well this is done right now. My impression is that there’s plenty of room for improvement in the standardized communication of opportunities, but as I’m not a YWAMer I’m not privy to internal email lists.

## **Swarms are Collaborative**

10. Responsible Autonomy: Interestingly enough, there is no formal international centralized YWAM headquarters. Each individual base is incorporated according to the laws of the country in which it resides – some as charities, some as corporations. Some bases aren't even incorporated at all, since they don't have any assets. There is nothing to take over.

11. Permissive Accountability: which refers to the ease with which someone can undertake a new work and the thoroughness to which work is held accountable to the Plausible Promise and Shared Values. I don't have first hand knowledge of this, but plenty of YWAMers have told me they have experienced both the ability to start new ministries and strong accountability systems.

12. Trusted Reputation: There is a general leadership hierarchy within YWAM but it's pretty flat, and in most cases it seems to me as an outsider that leadership is far more by influence than by command authority.

13. Consensus Leadership: Consensus is not "majority rules" but listening and discussing until unanimous agreement is achieved. I'm not sure if this is the overall pattern of YWAM, but it is in the bases that I am familiar with.

14. Collaboration. To what degree do YWAM bases collaborate with each other? Certainly they cooperate and coordinate operations at the national level. Further, some YWAMers have told me that cooperation between bases in different regions happens based on alumni relationships (i.e. someone comes to Base A from Base B, and thereafter a collaborative relationship springs up between the two bases).

15. Crowdsourcing: YWAM does tend to break up big, impossible global tasks into smaller, possible chunks, although this could perhaps be done better in bigger ways.

16. Curiosity: to what degree is a YWAM base connected with others who are "unlike" it (because the "new" is generally discovered from people who are less like you and more into things you're not expert on)? Aside from relational connections between bases, many YWAMers also appear to be connected to other partnerships and other organizations.

## **Swarms are Open:**

17. Free Lunches: due to the often low personal support budgets of YWAM staffers, I imagine that a lot of them use open source software – although I couldn't say this for sure. (Anyone want to write in?)

18. Standards-based tools: this is one area where YWAM seems to shine – the ability to create standardized curriculum for training and ministry and to roll it out rapidly for worldwide implementation in a highly decentralized fashion.

19. Encouraging Reuse: taking two existing standardized tools and putting them together to create a new tool is a “mashup” (because you are “mashing” the two together). YWAM's adaptable bases would seem to do this although I don't have specific examples.

## **Swarms are Adaptable:**

20. Continuous Improvement: whether YWAM exemplifies this is questionable. They are probably among the most adaptable and flexible organizations that I am familiar with, but there is still much improvement to be made. Toyota is my baseline model here, and I don't know of any organization that comes even close to its highly refined processes for continuous improvement.

21. Continuous Innovation: the birth of many of YWAM's ministries actually remind me of the birth of many Google products: as “20% projects” for Google staffers. (Google allows staffers to spend 20% of their time – 1 day a week – on personal projects; these have given rise to things like Google Mail and Google Reader). YWAM's global ministries were once base-specific ministries.

22. Pure Research: As a heavy % of their effort, I don't think YWAM devotes an enormous amount to research – but they still have some research efforts, including the 4K Project and others.

23. Prepared for the Unexpected: This category has to do with the discovery of the unplanned and the unknown through serendipitous or random happenstance. YWAM seems to be quite open to exploratory ministry.

## **Swarms are Culturally Influential:**

24. Niche Domination: to what extent does a YWAM ministry become the “best in class” in its region or its area? One example I know of is Create International, a YWAM ministry that produces videos about unreached peoples that are widely used by many non-YWAMers. Are there other examples?

25. Small Beginnings: Nearly every new YWAM base and ministry starts very small – perhaps with only a handful of people and no real budget.

26. Virtuous Cycles: To what extent does YWAM’s actions extend themselves and lead to more actions? One example of this is DTS, which serves as a sort of basic discipleship program for new believers. Young people take a season away for spiritual renewal to attend DTS. They become inspired – but they also learn a lot about YWAM. The same thing happens through the School of Evangelization and the School of Biblical Studies.

27. Viral Actions: the larger and more successful the swarm becomes, the lower its costs and more able it is to do things. YWAM has certainly demonstrated this through its growing ministries. Obvious in this is Mercy Ships, which has gone from being a YWAM ministry to being released as its own ministry.

28. Cultural Change: most ministry by a YWAM base is focused on the community immediately surrounding the base, and seeks cultural transformation. A great many (if not most?) of YWAM’s new members come out of people who have converted through their ministry.

## **Swarms are Multiplying:**

29. Growth in numbers: YWAM’s existing goal is to grow by an order of magnitude, from 20,000 to 200,000 staffers. Most bases that I have experience seem to be fairly stable in their numbers but have a high degree of turnover, and so have lots of “alumni.”

30. Planting Swarms: I’d like to note here an interesting thing about the way YWAM plants a base. Nearly every base starts with a catalytic founder who has a heart for it – but until the vision attracts a *team*, a base

cannot be formed. (Up until then it is a Point of Presence). Thus YWAM is really a swarm of swarms.

So that's it. 30 identifiers of swarmishness, which YWAM is a classic example of. If you enjoyed this article or want to add a note, be sure to use the comments below. If you like this case study, I can post others!

