



Episode 107: Understanding Strategic Leadership, It's Not All Hot Dogs & Beach Balls

Featuring: Mingo Palacios & Ted Vaughn

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Transcript:

Mingo Palacios:

Thanks for tuning in to the PD Podcast. In this first episode, I'm going to introduce you to my friend Ted Vaughn as we talk about strategic leadership, and then in the episodes to follow we're going to be talking about the dilemma I have with one of my ministries, and then some of his insights on how to fix it. I hope you came ready to take notes. It's a great conversation.

Hey, everybody, welcome to the PD Podcast. My name is Mingo, and as your host, my goal is always to bring something educational, something beneficial to the table – not just because I want you to learn more, but selfishly, I want to learn more. In my new seat as the lead pastor at Torrey Pines Church in San Diego, I'm looking for the best tools and I'm looking for the

best people who can help me be the best version of myself.

Today across the table, I've got my dear friend and also what I would call ministry coach. You have been a voice of reason and purpose and clarity through several iterations of what I would call my ministry lifecycle.

Ted Vaughn, who is partner in a few companies and a voice inside of several churches by way of consultation, is joining us today, talking all about strategic leadership and some of the things that he sees across the wide landscape of churches as they're all looking to clarify what 2020 will look like – and the years beyond that. 2020, everybody was saying, "This is the year we're going to get vision for what's to come."

Ted Vaughn:

Right, see clearly.

Mingo Palacios:

I feel bad. If your church is in that, if you've already printed it and branded it, you've got to go with it now. But for the sake of actually seeing clearly and building a roadmap, this has been something that I have been convicted by. We pick a word for the year at our church, and if you're listening and you're in a wireframe or if you're in a structure like our church is – I'm not independent. We're a family of churches. There's a collaborative voice that picks the word of the year, and then all of our churches lean towards that.

Now, my responsibility locally is to figure out how we express that. Ted's been a great voice. He's asking me these questions, "Mingo, what's your vision 24 months out? What's your vision 36 months out?" so that you can properly structure your organization in a way that can achieve some of the things that you've got brewing in your own heart.

Ted, welcome to the podcast. Always enjoy having you. What are some of these consistent patterns you're seeing with ministries that you engage with that are causing you to want to speak more definitively about strategic leadership?

Ted Vaughn:

That's a great question. I've been doing this now for 7-½ years, and there are trends that I saw 7 years ago – even experienced when I was on full-time staff with you at the Rock – and those trends have only I think gotten more broad. A few of them are related to the question of discipleship.

Probably the most classic discipleship question I walk into is whether or not evangelism, outreach, mission, external impact and discipleship are integrated into the same conversation. Most of the time, theologically, philosophically, pastors all believe that they should be absolutely part of the same conversation. But when you look at how they're structured, when you look at how they're led, when you look at how they're handled on the strategic calendar, they're unbelievably siloed. There's little to no integration between how a short terms mission trip or a local food pantry ministry or –

Mingo Palacios:

Season for growth groups.

Ted Vaughn:

Whatever, yeah, how do all those things integrate together to actually develop better disciples? Again, rhetorically, theologically, conversation, everybody gets that. Could talk about it forever. But the way it plays out in their organizational structure, in their leadership, in their metrics, and what they count, huge –

Mingo Palacios:

Gaps.

Ted Vaughn:

Yeah, huge disintegration and lack of integration. So that's one thing. How do we bring those back into the same conversation?

Part of why it's so controversial is because typically, many of those things, like global missions, have deep trenches that have run for decades with a certain type of leadership, certain type of assumption around giving dollars to certain missionaries in certain places. The idea that somebody will come in and now try and rethink that and repurpose dollars or no longer fund certain things – for the purpose of greater impact, being on mission better, it's very threatening.

So I think it's been very difficult, especially for young pastors, to get their arms wrapped around how we take preexisting ministry paradigms and get permission to deconstruct or rethink or put them on the chopping block or potentially kill. It's difficult. It's difficult for the strategic leadership to actually catch up to the theology and discipleship thinking of the young leader.

Mingo Palacios:

Let me put this into a real life application. I've always existed inside of somebody else's ministry wheelhouse. I've been a player on a team. I've been a cog in a much larger machine. I've always just received the order of importance of things or built my calendar around a much larger master calendar that existed for me or before me.

Now, as the lead pastor here, I'm thinking of people who are – our listeners are of that similar pedigree. They are inside of somebody's larger organization. But it won't exempt them from wanting to build a healthy rhythm and habit, wanting to see something holistically. This is probably where I have fallen into my own need for your advice and direction. I'm really good at seeing things 3 months, 6 months, and at the farthest scope, 12 months out, where I'm thinking "Next year I'd love to see X because of my belief in this."

But you're coming to the table declaring or even offering the idea of creating a few statements based off of exploring some beliefs internally that can help an organization set a long-term trajectory of health and sustainability that doesn't leave any of these majors out. How do you even get started? Somebody on my end, how did you engage with me? What was that conversation that you're like "Hey Mingo, this is a thing that you started out of passion" – I'm thinking maybe our own Dinner Service. "There's some things you ought to think about when it comes to your belief."

Ted Vaughn:

This is one of the biggest gaps I see in first-time senior pastors, or again, I'll say young leaders who are probably in their first senior role. You are a great example of that.

Most of your career has been spent doing something more niche, and at times even more disruptive. Your job has been to disrupt the way things are happening. My job is to run interference and protection for you so that you could be out there doing things that were progressive, pioneering. That's a fantastic, a little bit more narrow and niche way of doing ministry. It's what prepares you for senior leadership.

When you step into senior leadership, you're now responsible for all of those niches, all of those things, the entire arsenal of ministry under your belt. If you don't understand how to bring all of that into a common vision and alignment, how to put all of that between similar riverbanks, then all those things will function and become their own siloes.

One of the biggest questions for any new leader in a new organization, a new church, is how does everything we're doing fit together? This could be called brand strategy, this could be called vision clarity. And it's not just writing a bumper sticker that says "Jesus changes everything. That's our vision." That's nothing.

Mingo Palacios: I would argue that's everything. [laughs]

Ted Vaughn: It's so everything, it's nothing.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah, that's exactly right.

Ted Vaughn: It's not actually helpful.

Mingo Palacios: I think this is what I ran into. A great catchphrase that I could lay over everything.

Ted Vaughn: I love marketing. I love bumper stickers. I love statements that pull emotional triggers – as long as they're fed by or informed by a more robust sense of clarity that says, ultimately, "The Kingdom contribution of this church is this, and therefore we're going to do or not do. We're going to focus on or not focus on." That's strategy.

You can't have strategy if you don't have, at the top of the funnel, some apostolic conviction and passion that says "I as senior pastor have been called here, and the combination of where I am and who I am becomes some type of clarifying conversation that results in some kind of articulated statement."

If you can do that, you now have the top of the funnel, and now you can move to the next layer of the funnel down and answer questions like, what should we measure and define success by in 2-3 years? What should we focus on or not focus on in the next 2 years when it comes to discipleship? How does that top-of-the-funnel vision or sense of clarity or direction inform how we approach global missions? There's a litany of questions that you can start to answer.

But if you don't have that high level sense of clarity – "This is who I am as a leader, this is where God's brought me, this is how these two things together inform our future" – you have to start there, because all the little tactical questions, if you don't have some sort of ultimate clarity on who you are, what you're called to do, and what that means, you'll never really be able to answer them in a sustainable way.

Mingo Palacios:

I've got a question for you. As I'm thinking about my own pathway and some of the tendencies of the generation that I do ministry side by side with, I've been really tempted not to make that vision statement or claim in a vacuum or by myself.

Ted Vaughn:

Well, you're part of a network, so to a certain extent you come under an existing one, which is awesome and challenging at the same time.

Mingo Palacios:

Yeah, it's got opportunities and it's got some tensions in it. But I'm even just thinking about my own vision pathway, my own dreams and desires that I want to roll out to the 600 or 800 people that call this place home. I have been really compelled to invite other people to the table to say, "I've got an idea of a vision, but I'm actually more interested in what your vision is. Can we put all of them on the table together and can we draft a single vision?"

All that example to say that I'm finding myself leaning much more to a collaborative initial thought. Is that dangerous?

Ted Vaughn: Yes and no. We need more collaborative leaders. We need more leaders who are saying to other young leaders, "Hey, I'm interested not just in you getting in my box, but in you creating your own box, and I'll get in your box."

Mingo Palacios: Because it says "This is our sandbox together."

Ted Vaughn: But here's the problem. If you don't say – at some point you're inviting them into a sandbox. You're not saying, "Let's go plant a church."

Mingo Palacios: No, the church is already planted.

Ted Vaughn: You're inviting them to be a part of something that – my example would be you're inviting them to build or get into a canoe that is in an existing river that has riverbanks. Every river, like every church across the globe, is made up of roughly the same ingredients, but they all are different, like rivers. What defines them? What differentiates them? The riverbanks. Your values, your vision – if you don't give them clarity on your riverbanks, you're inviting them into something without them understanding to a certain extent how they can add value.

Mingo Palacios: I've got to at least start with some original ingredients. I don't think anybody would miss that, at least in my own church. You can't sit through a Sunday or a series and not get an inclination of what it is that I'm about.

Now, when I invite certain people to the table, I'm inviting people who have already committed to the ministry with me. So as I put a ministry vision in front of me, my assumption is that they're not thinking I'm inviting them to a Level 5 rapid river. If I've already showed them that I am a particular – I'm the Colorado.

Ted Vaughn: I think you're right. I think what's dangerous about what you're saying, maybe, is that it's too intuitive.

You're saying if they sit through a service or two, of course they're going to get it. I don't know.

Mingo Palacios:

Well, for an attendee, sure, but let's say for my highest level leaders.

Ted Vaughn:

Maybe.

Mingo Palacios:

Those are the ones that I'm inviting in to share vision.

Ted Vaughn:

But how much better to be able to say to them – and I'll just use a different church as an example – “Listen, I love that you're passionate about reaching people who are pre-Christians through a Dinner Service. That's awesome. I want to invite you to dream about that with me, to be a leader of that thing, but let's make sure that it happens in light of our mission and our values.” “Oh, what's that?” “Our mission is to (hypothetically) be the light of Christ in a hurting culture so the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed.” “Oh my gosh, what is the fatherless” – right?

A statement like I just read has unbelievable intention, unique language, on purpose, and it should all tether to something. What are our values? We believe that we're better together, that means community. We're student strong. We're all about equipping students to lead.

So if you can have some articulation of your riverbanks and your sense of mission, that helps a young leader. You can empower them because you've given them –

Mingo Palacios:

But as a pastor, I need to go and do that legwork first myself.

Ted Vaughn:

I think so. Putting it on the walls is fine. At the end of the day, leadership development in a ministry context – I believe young leaders – any leader. I keep saying young, but any leader finds their value and their identity in the context of mission. We don't reshape mission because of a person. We invite a person to discover why God's called them to a mission, and in the context of mission, discover who they are.

I don't think we develop young leaders effectively if we don't give them some degree of parameters on what it is they're contributing or called to contribute to. It's not just their own prophetic imagination. There's something there.

Mingo Palacios:

I think you call leaders in because you see an alignment with the vision that you've got, even if you're not articulating it super well.

Ted Vaughn:

And there's probably chemistry. There's obviously trust. There's got to be some degree of perhaps history. All of that's wonderful. But that alone, some intuitive alignment or chemistry alone, is dangerous.

Mingo Palacios:

Where have you seen it totally blow up? [laughs]

Ted Vaughn:

Okay, great example. I'll get a phone call from – let's just call it the next generation pastor – about changing the worship culture of their church. I'm like, "I've been a part of worship culture change. I get that. I can do it all day long. Let's talk about it." So we start talking.

Mingo Palacios:

Let's get in the water.

Ted Vaughn:

Yeah, we're paddling together, and one of the questions eventually I ask is, "Where's your senior pastor on this?" "Well, I mean" –

Mingo Palacios:

"We haven't necessarily brought some things to his attention yet."

Ted Vaughn:

Okay, time out, time out. You've got a senior leader, you've got a mission and vision that they have breathed, and you're wanting to massively disrupt a core piece of this thing.

Mingo Palacios:

Fundamental part of the ministry.

Ted Vaughn:

Right. That is an example to me of a young leader who's been empowered, who feels empowered, who wants to do something massive, and doesn't realize that they're about to do something that's going to sabotage them or their influence.

Mingo Palacios:

Credibility.

Ted Vaughn: Yeah. There are lots of examples where – well, I guess that represents a leadership breakdown as much as it does an alignment issue. But I often see and meet young leaders who are passionate and who are gifted and who haven't been brought in to the broader sum of the whole, either because they're scary because they're either immature, they're not diplomatic, they're not whatever it is, or because they're on an edge of ministry that the rest of the church isn't on or the rest of the leadership isn't on, and they don't know what to do about that.

Mingo Palacios: They don't know how to carry that probably into that space in a way that makes it relevant to the larger conversation. Man, I've been there before. [laughs]

Ted Vaughn: Yeah. I feel like we've drifted between a couple of topics.

Mingo Palacios: Of course.

Ted Vaughn: One, you've got to have some sort of differentiating, clarifying, internal clarity around who you are as a church. That aids in developing young leaders, calling them into things, empowering, decentralizing power. You also have to have senior leadership who are willing to come alongside the young, perhaps irreverent or –

Mingo Palacios: Inexperienced, those that don't have a lexicon for the way things are.

Ted Vaughn: Disruptive. They often get called "the youth guy." That's just a simple patronizing way of going "oh, you can just toss them away because they're just a youth person." Hot dogs and beach ball. Their opinion doesn't really matter. The reality is, that "youth guy," that missional young guy, they're the ones who are equipped and who have God dreams for what church will look like in the next 50 years, and if we don't figure out how to empower them and bring them into ministry, it's at our own peril.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah, they'll find a place where they can be planted and they can give their best in that ecosystem if they're not finding any oxygen in yours.

Ted Vaughn:

If your mission as a church is – like the example of the one I read – “Our mission is to be the light of Christ in a hurting culture so the lost are found, the broken made whole,” there are a billion ways to do that. Most of the time, it will be somebody unbelievably missional, uniquely called to serve on the edge of what the church might be doing. You have to find those people and give them a sandbox to play in, because they will help you stay relevant not just in style, but relevant in ministry tactics, because they’ll help you understand the people we’re ministering to beyond just the people who come to our church every day already.

Mingo Palacios:

Real case scenario in my own leadership funnel, if you will. I’ve got my office, our staff, and we set the trajectory and the pace for all ministry that happens here. Then as we are growing, I see emerging leaders enter into our ministry landscape, and they come to the table with a great idea, but not necessarily all the great tactics or strategies on how to see what I can identify – “Man, this idea could actually take shape, it can serve a segment that we don’t currently have reach points with.”

Where is the right place for me to draw the boundary, these riverbanks, in saying “Hey guys, I love that this is your aim, but if you don’t major in the minors like building structures for each of these teams, paying into the pathways that we’ve already built, the infrastructures of coaching and apprenticing, you’re going to miss. And I don’t want this great idea to start and then fail because of a lack of infrastructure”? Does that make sense? This is the question.

From my senior office all the way down to these really willing emerging leaders, there’s a tension in like “We can do it, we’ve got it; we just need the keys” and me saying, “Man, I’ve been there before. There are some baseline things if you miss, it won’t live beyond next year.” Because that’s my end goal now: longevity in ministry for every segment of player on my campus.

Ted Vaughn:

One church I worked with, one of their stated values is something like “leadership multiplication is our passion,” or leadership duplication. One of the ways

that played out for them was they said, to anybody in the case of you, one person isn't enough. Whatever you're going to do needs a team. We'll give you keys, empower you, budget, whatever empowerment looks like. That happens after there's been some sort of vetting, and part of that vetting process is there's got to be a team. One person who had a burrito and then had a vision isn't enough.

There's got to be a group of people that together share this vision and who are a part of this church. And if you have that vision and you feel like you just need a team, then go find them. If you have a team and you all are slightly off on the vision, then figure out what it is. But that became a prerequisite to being given any type of –

Mingo Palacios:

Team was a part of the –

Ted Vaughn:

Yeah, minimum number of people, and a balance of gifting. Going back with the strategic funnel, somebody who has a clear sense of vision and passion at the top of the funnel, and then somebody who can operate, who can get stuff done, who can execute, who at least speaks that language. The helpful balance of that – in some personality assessments, like in the PCA world, it would be Prophet, Priest, King. The King is the orderly strategy, the Prophet is the passion for change, and the Priest is the love of people.

Some balance of those two or three elements would be critical for them to actually A) determine that it's something God's doing and B) empower it to go.

Mingo Palacios:

Let's say you get thrust into a ministry and you're trying to discover all the depths or you're trying to find the riverbanks, but it's not specifically clear. Is there a preferred pathway for somebody who's like, "Hey, I want to actually figure some of these roadmaps out so that the next group of people can lead better, more clearly"? Where does somebody begin? What are some of the telltale signs that you should probably be thinking about strategic leadership in your camp?

Ted Vaughn: That's a great question. When you say where does somebody begin, are you talking about where does somebody who's interested in ministry begin the journey of going to full-time ministry?

Mingo Palacios: No, I'm actually thinking of somebody who's like "I can do it" without having evidence or proper documents for other people to buy in. I've always led on the passionate speech. I'm like, "Let me tell you what I'm thinking over a coffee or a drink, and I can draw it up on a napkin. If you can see yourself in the napkin, I can buy you for about 6 months' worth of engagement."

But lo and behold, if I don't build a proper ministry roadmap and show people where they exist in that spectrum, you lose people based on other interests. That's what happens. Something else, something shinier happens in their world, something with better pay pops up in their inbox. So my gut is that as I continue to clarify my own 24-36 month vision, that starts to do the work for me instead of me having to spin my own wheels over coffee, on napkins, over and over and over again.

Ted Vaughn: You want to revisit that plan with the right leaders to ensure – because God does do new things. God does show up and change plans, and oftentimes reality helps us discern what God's doing, and our 3-year, 5-year, 7-year vision, we modify it. But better to have a plan you're changing than to not have a plan.

To your first question, if you're a young leader –

Mingo Palacios: I call them emerging leaders, because you might be new to the experience.

Ted Vaughn: You're totally right. I don't know why "young leader" is my default.

Mingo Palacios: It's okay, it's cultural. I'm going with emerging leader because that word "emergent" was so taboo. Do you remember that? Wow, watch out.

Ted Vaughn: I do. The emergent conference.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah.

Ted Vaughn: I remember Dallas Willard, at one of the emergent conferences I went to, he walked out on stage – he was supposed to be a 20-minute keynote, and he basically said, “Listen, I see a lot of you emerging from something without any clue what you’re emerging to.”

Mingo Palacios: That’s a good word.

Ted Vaughn: “You need to answer that, or all of this will be wasted.” And he walked off the stage. [laughs] You could hear the room, like *bing*.

Mingo Palacios: “Can I get a selfie now, or...?” [laughs]

Ted Vaughn: It was brutal. Yeah, it was brutal.

Mingo Palacios: “Would you be available for signatures after this?”

Ted Vaughn: He was saying, “I applaud you for emerging from something, but if you don’t figure out where you’re going, then...”

Mingo Palacios: In my mind that definition, the idea of emerging is you’re coming up out of something. Most people are coming up out of something.

Ted Vaughn: We’re always coming out of something.

Mingo Palacios: Yes.

Ted Vaughn: And the pace of change is creating an out of, into the new.

Mingo Palacios: It’s breaking next.

Ted Vaughn: To the point where there’s no longer an old paradigm. They’re all old paradigms. I was just talking to my daughter about a song, and she’s like, “This is old school. This is OG.” It was from 2010. It’s not like Motown.

Mingo Palacios: Depending on who you’re asking. Yeah, exactly. It can be old or it can be the newest thing.

Ted Vaughn:

But to your question, young leader wrestling with ministry, they're probably employed in some marketing agency or perhaps they're a lawyer or whatever it is, but they have this burden.

This is I think where oftentimes we go wrong. I think that pastors have an assumption that somebody in their church who has an apostolic passion or vision for ministry, it must somehow have to fit in their current church ministry. Frequently it doesn't, and your job is to say to that person, "That's incredible. There's not room for that here." It doesn't add value, and you don't want to force-fit that person into something that really isn't them.

So part of the challenge – I would even ask you, Mingo. If somebody comes to you and has a vision for something that does not align or fit effectively into what you're doing, how do we walk alongside that person to help them identify where they should go, what church they should be a part of? Do we release them to a different church or to a different leader or to a different place where we think they might be much more aligned? Because I think sometimes we become very – we make an assumption that our local church where this person is currently must be where they're supposed to stay.

Mingo Palacios:

Yeah, that's good. Just because they end up in your camp, doesn't mean they're built for your camp.

Ted Vaughn:

Recently I was talking with an organization about their staff turnover. There's this idea that if our staff are turning over frequently, there must be something wrong. I think to a certain extent that's normal. There's a certain pace of change, there's a certain pace of disruption, there's a certain pace of movement that is now normal. If we apply 1985 metrics to organizational health or to leadership development and we forget what's happened in millennial and the next generation, then we aren't really helping ourselves.

Mingo Palacios:

I certainly hope that my posture is if somebody brings a great idea to the table, that I would be clear enough or humble enough to say "Although it may not work

here, I want to be a part of the solution to help you figure out where that could help or fit.”

I just had a conversation about somebody who is rewiring even the idea of church membership, talking about how instead of making it membership to an organization, you change the paradigm to membership in a family. This person has inroads – all of their children are adopted, and so their perception of what it means to be members of a family has these really reasonable and I think credible lines in, where somebody says “being a part of a family means we’ve got these standards.” It’s not “being a part of this organization means that you get these perks.”

I was telling this person, the church that you’re trying to bring this idea to, if they aren’t ready to receive it, it doesn’t mean that it’s an idea dead in the water. That idea may be the solution for a church 5 miles down the road who doesn’t have that thinker in their camp.

Ted Vaughn:

No doubt.

Mingo Palacios:

So it’s your job at least to come to the publishing table. Put it out there, whether it’s a blog, whether it’s an episode of a podcast. Put it out there on social media so that if God is going to use your idea for another camp, it makes its way there. If you come up with an idea and it gets turned down in one shot and then you scrap it, throw it in the recycling bin, it could’ve been a breakthrough for another community that never makes its way to fruition.

Ted Vaughn:

And that leader that has started here could very well need to be transplanted to different soil, because in that soil they’ll flourish and they’ll add tons of value to the garden. God will use people no matter where they’re planted, but I think sometimes we fail to help people reach their peak because we’re afraid to transplant them or lose them.

Mingo Palacios:

That’s a great word.

Ted Vaughn:

One of the earlier questions that you were talking about around young leaders – I’m sorry, emerging leaders –

Mingo Palacios:

Yeah, you like that language?

Ted Vaughn:

Yeah, I'm trying to get it in my head. Ah, I'm actually spacing on my point. It was so real for me 30 seconds ago.

Mingo Palacios:

[laughs] You really considered it.

Ted Vaughn:

It was right there. I felt like I could touch it, and now it's just out of my grasp. I can't remember what I was saying.

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