



# DEFINING MOMENTS

## Process Tool

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### The Power of Leading with Axioms

#### Summary

Bill Hybels recently released a book titled *Axiom*. Axioms — carefully-crafted phrases of just a few words — have been powerful leadership tools, not only for Bill, but also for many other leaders, both past and present. By using axioms, leaders can communicate a complex concept, value, or a learned leadership lesson, and these axioms become part of the organization's culture. Michael Simone, senior pastor of Spring Branch Community Church in Virginia Beach, has also been using axioms for years. In this edition of *Defining Moments*, host Nancy Beach interviews Bill and Michael about the power of leading with axioms.

#### Outline

##### I. What an Axiom Is

- A. Axioms are proverbs that represent the way things are in the arena of leadership.
- B. They are sound bytes that represent truths, similar to biblical proverbs.
- C. Axioms bring a laser focus to your mind and open a clear path to follow.
- D. Michael's family has shared axioms with him since his childhood.
- E. Michael regularly reads books on axioms that have interesting things to say about God, faith, love, or grace.
  1. *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* lists axioms that go back from 50 to 500 years.
  2. Dag Hammarskjold, secretary general of the United Nations, has also written a book on axioms called *Markings*.
  3. In books of poetry by Robert Frost, there are many axiomatic expressions.
  4. All those resources help Michael think, and they season his mind, so that God can nudge him in a certain direction, through the Holy Spirit, when He needs to.

##### II. Benefits of Axioms

- A. Through the use of axioms, organizations develop a common language and value system.
- B. At Willow, Bill has refined the axiom "Speak the last 10 percent of truth" to "Speak the final 2 percent of truth."
  1. In a recent staff meeting dealing with an area of the church that was fuzzy and had some personal friction, someone at the table commented, "Yep, it's time for a last 2 percent conversation."
  2. The minute he said it, everyone around the table knew what that was.
  3. Axioms provide a code language that brings precision to what you say.
  4. Those phrases have become grounding tools for all of the leaders at Willow, and they refer to them often.
- C. Axioms create a steady and even-keeled culture of communication.

- D. After hearing Richard Allen Farmer use the axiom “making the mummies dance” to refer to good, creative communication, Michael shared it with his staff.
  - 1. Now whenever staff members say “mummies” to each other, they all know they are talking about communication that draws people into the learning experience.
- E. Axioms help establish values in a culture.
  - 1. Bill decided years ago that when a staff member leaves, they should bring their ministry at Willow to a conclusion honorably.
  - 2. He discussed his thoughts with staff, which led to an axiom they have used for more than 20 years: “Finish well.”
  - 3. Finishing well is now a well-owned value around Willow.
- F. Axioms can assist leaders in the decision-making process.
  - 1. Leaders make decisions often — sometimes at an alarming rate in a given day or week.
  - 2. One example of a decision-making axiom is “a bias for action.”
    - a. When the decision on the table is whether to move ahead or play it conservatively, Bill has learned that action tends to lead to more good than inaction, most of the time.
    - b. He doesn’t choose to take the bold road every single time, but he favors action over inaction.
  - 3. Bill keeps about a dozen different axioms in his mind that affect his decision-making processes.

### III. How Axioms Are Created

- A. Bill reflected on this process while he was writing his book and realized that he tends to create axioms intuitively.
  - 1. First, he spends time reflecting on whether a concept he thinks he sees repeating is true.
    - a. For instance, Bill noticed that often there was a lack of clarity in most communication situations.
    - b. He wondered if he could say something specific that would bring clarity when ending most communications with staff, boards, or volunteers.
    - c. He tried the phrase, “Just to be clear....”
  - 2. Next, he looks for opportunities to repeat it and see if it gains traction in the culture.
- B. In order to work, axioms need to be:
  - 1. Memorable
  - 2. In the form of sound bytes rather than paragraphs
  - 3. Something you say naturally, so that it’s repeatable
- C. An axiom Bill is currently testing out is, “When something feels funky, engage.”
  - 1. Often when leaders are walking around, they pick up on a hint of something funky going in a particular department.
  - 2. Sometimes they tend to avoid addressing it and hope it will be resolved.
  - 3. Bill’s experience is that whenever you avoid funk, it becomes a bigger problem to deal with down the road.
- D. Michael has a similar axiom, which is, “Say what you see; say what you feel.”
  - 1. It’s easy to do, but scary sometimes.
  - 2. It encourages people toward conflict resolution when you give them permission to talk about whatever they see.

#### IV. Making Axioms Stick

- A. Telling the story that's behind an axiom helps it come alive.
  - 1. Painting a colorful picture makes it memorable.
  - 2. Adding the context also helps the axiom stick.
- B. Axioms aren't going to fit in every single situation, but when you have the right one for the right context, it really works well.
- C. With every story you tell, there's probably an axiom waiting to emerge.
  - 1. One example is a story about the old, unreliable car Michael had when he was in seminary.
    - a. After repeated failures trying to start the car, he examined the engine and realized that inserting a screwdriver between the two contacts on the starter would get him going to his destination.
    - b. So when he faces problematic situations, is stalled, and can't figure a way to get things going, he says, "Where's the screwdriver?"
    - c. Finding a way to get two points to connect might jumpstart a problematic process and get everything moving.
  - 2. Another example is a story about Michael's son's baseball game.
    - a. They were down by one run, and the game ended with Michael's son left on third base when the final batter struck out.
    - b. Michael said to his son, "We lost by one, and you should have stole home."
    - c. His son said, "If I only knew, I would have!"
    - d. Out of that story Michael developed the axiom, "Your next move changes everything."

#### V. Using Axioms with Church Staff

- A. Michael uses the axiom "broom theology" with his staff.
  - 1. It comes from Michael's story of working for a moving and storage trucking company years ago.
  - 2. On days when work was slow, the old guy in the warehouse would say, "If you have nothing to do, pick up a broom and start sweeping the warehouse."
  - 3. Around the church there are times like that, and broom theology says, "Look around for someone who needs help or somewhere you can help."
  - 4. It's those kinds of attitudes that change a community.
  - 5. Church only works when everyone embraces broom theology.
  - 6. In her book, *Tough Choices*, Carly Fiorina says that when you're done with your usual activities, figure out ways to add value.
  - 7. When leaders take responsibility to add value, they create a culture of that, and it's an exciting culture to work in.
  - 8. Michael once heard that love is the only difference between a team and a high-performance team.
    - a. Love is at the heart of broom theology.
    - b. When you bring love together with a sense of responsibility, it can change a staff and how the departments interrelate.
    - c. It can change a church, and then that church changes the world.
- B. Several years ago, the axiom "umbrella of mercy" came out of a book that the Willow Arts team was studying and spread to the rest of the church.

1. "Umbrella of mercy" means, "I'm going to propose a high-risk idea, and something in me wishes there was an umbrella of safety over my head to protect me from bad reactions."
2. By calling for an "umbrella of mercy," you ask to be granted that feeling of protection that those listening will be respectful of your idea.
3. The phrase is so familiar around Willow that they don't even need to say it anymore; people just place a hand parallel to the top of their head, and everyone knows what they're asking for.
4. Bill talked about it at a previous Leadership Summit, and it's now widely used in churches around the world.
5. Everyone feels that emotional risk when a new idea is put out on the table.
6. If it's not a safe environment, the potential for a risky idea to be expressed and maybe lead to other ideas is squelched.

## VI. Visual Axioms

- A. Michael often uses a picture as a kind of axiom.
- B. During a capital campaign for their new building at Spring Branch, they wanted a picture that captured the idea of a place to call home.
  1. They used a picture of a fishbowl with a goldfish leaping out of a smaller bowl into a larger bowl.
  2. They put the image on t-shirts, talked about it, and showed a video of it on Sunday mornings.
  3. It helped people connect with moving into that larger space.
  4. Everyone owned it and lived it together.
- C. Peter Drucker says that the best way to predict the future is to create it.
  1. In another capital campaign, Michael talked to the congregation about how their commitments would write the future, and they could predict it by creating it.
  2. They put that phrase on magnets people could place on their fridge or file cabinets at home or work.

## VII. Violating Axioms

- A. Periodically Bill may violate an axiom, but he doesn't do it carelessly.
- B. Axioms are created when a behavior or value happens so often that it becomes predictable.
- C. Leadership axioms are not infallible biblical truth; they help us define the way things *tend* to be.
- D. If there's a conflict with a clear teaching of Jesus or a clear witness of the Holy Spirit, Jesus or the Holy Spirit should win every time.

## VIII. Scripture-Based Axioms

- A. One of Michael's favorite axioms from Scripture is Ecclesiastes 12:10, "The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly" (NASB).
  1. When instructing other teachers, he encourages them to write "delightful words" that will engage their audience, but also to have the truth firmly embedded in their message.
  2. Every message needs to have both sides well integrated.
- B. Another favorite is Isaiah 66:2, "... to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word" (NASB).
  1. Michael refers to that when trying to convey what humility is and to encourage people in confession of sin.
- C. He also uses Proverbs 27:17 a lot: "Iron sharpens iron..." (NASB).

1. The tension in sharpening a relationship can produce heat sometimes.
  2. When Michael uses that axiom, he's saying, "It's all right that there's some dissonance in the room."
  3. He used it in an e-mail recently, saying, "I hope you'll take my feedback in the spirit of Proverbs 27:17."
- D. Hebrews 12:11 says, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (NASB).
1. When you're with someone who is feeling the pinch of discipline, you can share that with them, and you take them to the other side.
  2. The power of the Word of God in axiomatic form is very transformational.
- E. Bill uses Matthew 10:16 more than any other verse in Scripture: "... be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (ESV).
1. That thought keeps him asking himself throughout the day, "What would wisdom require?"
  2. It keeps his focus on what is God honoring rather than what is quick, comfortable, or painless.

## IX. Practical Use of Axioms

- A. About half of what leaders do is ask people to step up to something.
1. Usually what Bill's asking people to step up to is a big deal — for instance, walk away from sin and choose righteousness, or leave something important to you and follow Jesus.
  2. Leaders have to be comfortable enough to "make the big ask."
- B. Closely connected to "make the big ask" is "don't say someone's no for them."
1. It's a bigger thing than you might think to get straight in your mind.
  2. Whether you're considering asking for donations or inviting a seeker to a church service, don't say someone's no for them.
  3. Let the Holy Spirit decide what He's going to do, and give people a chance to respond to that voice.
- C. From a Willow conference many years ago, Michael heard the axiom "doable hard versus destructive hard."
1. His staff was electrified by that axiom, because they were going through a hard season of ministry.
  2. It gave them a language they didn't have, and suddenly they realized that they needed to take care of themselves.
  3. Today, it's still one of the key concepts that anchor the staff at Spring Branch.
  4. Bill remembers when "doable hard versus destructive hard" first occurred to him.
    - a. There was something rhythmic about it that told him that one was going to stick.
    - b. God doesn't ask us to do things that will wreck souls and relationships.
    - c. Jesus said, "... my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (NIV).
    - d. We know something's wrong if we're working at a destructive level.
- D. Bill created the axiom "DNA carriers" to refer to specific people who embody the story, identity, and values of an organization.
1. DNA carriers infuse those values into other people.
  2. Organizations are at risk when they add staff too rapidly and end up with a wrong proportion of true DNA carriers.

3. The right balance ensures that everyone will eventually become a true DNA carrier.
- E. Michael found the axiom “take the high road” to be very important during the building of their church.
  1. With all the different pieces of a building program, some problems or disagreements are bound to arise.
  2. They had one particular conflict with sound in their auditorium.
  3. After multiple meetings, although they felt they were right and justified in their complaint, they decided to pay the contractor, walk away, and deal with it in another way.
  4. Choices to “take the high road” are very important in the overall witness of the Christian community.

## X. How to Form Your Own Axioms

- A. There’s a discipline involved in articulating your point of view in the form of an axiom.
  1. It’s a self-discipline taking the time to reflect on a value and working the wording so that the phrase can stick.
  2. It might take two hours to get it right, but the life of that phrase over decades has such great impact that those two hours are negligible.
  3. Colin Powell developed some axioms that are called the “Powell Principles.”
    - a. One of them is, “Check your ego at the door.”
    - b. Every part of that is memorable for Bill — even the vision of walking through the door, checking your coat, leaving your ego, doing business, and picking it up when you leave.
- B. To form your own axioms, ask yourself what you believe deeply about a few things like meetings, hiring, or conflict resolution.
  1. If you identify something, craft it, test-fly it to see if it gains traction, and repeat it.
- C. Some ideas for encouraging axiom development in other leaders might include:
  1. As a senior pastor, consider putting your top ten axioms together and teaching in a staff meeting how they shape your thinking processes and what they speak into the life of your church.
  2. Michael distributed Pez dispensers to interns at Spring Branch and asked them to describe what it meant to them and to their ministry.
    - a. Using tactile and visual approaches draws out the creative side of who we are and helps us put words to ideas.
  3. Take a worksheet with stages of life listed at the top of the columns, and record the most meaningful axiom that changed you at that time of your life.
    - a. Bill and Michael both remember an axiom from their first job that they carry with them to this day.
- D. A sentence can change your life if you commit yourself to the value it represents and you rehearse it in your head.
- E. Many staff members have these things rolling around in their heads, and they don’t even know they are there.
- F. It’s OK to use other’s axioms, but the ones that have meaning to you personally will have the most impact on your life.

## XI. The Power of Axioms

- A. As a lifelong Yankee fan, Michael had an opportunity to get a private tour of the new Yankee stadium, and that story created an axiom.

1. He took two elders and his children to New York to see this billion-dollar construction project.
  2. While on the field, he decided to crouch at third base and run across home plate like he was actually in a game.
  3. One of the elders took a picture, and he now has this photo of him scoring the first run at the new Yankee stadium.
  4. He could have just stood in wonder of the great memories that were about to come, or he could choose to become part of it himself and have that forever.
  5. The dust on his shoes was proof that he had fully participated.
  6. It became a great analogy in a message to his congregation about arriving in heaven and having Jesus look down at our feet to see if we have dust on our shoes.
- B. When we paint those pictures, craft those words, and deliver them well, people accept them as gifts, and they take them with them for the rest of their lives.
1. The hope is that the church will be changed by what we do and impact the world because we share great truths.
- C. The response to Bill's book, *Axiom*, has been very strong.
1. Bill thinks it's the congruency of everyday experience and the resonance with the Word of God that strikes a chord.
  2. Every leader believes in something deeply, and when you give words, pictures, and phrases to establish that conviction in the culture you lead, that's a great experience for a leader.
- D. A particularly poignant axiom of Bill's life is the phrase: "The local church is the hope of the world."
1. He doesn't remember when he said it exactly the first time, and it's not an original concept.
  2. As important as that phrase is to him or to those in the developed world, think what it means to a pastor in Cairo or Angola who have to hold onto it just to keep going one more day.
  3. Leaders have to summon energy to dig into something, to get up again tomorrow, to lead, to pay the price, to keep cheering people on, and to take the hits they have to take.
  4. Leaders need powerful, axiomatic sound bytes to keep them going.

## Process Questions

1. Bill and Michael listed axioms they use on a frequent basis from several categories — some Scripture-based, some practical, some emphasizing values, and some aiding in the decision-making process. Did any axioms you use come to your mind during this edition? If so, jot down one or two that you can identify.

2. One of the main benefits of axioms is that they help establish the culture of an organization. Bill and Michael mentioned a few axioms that are either part of their church's culture or that they're working on implementing. Did any of these speak to you as a value you'd like to see developed more fully in your church or organization? If so, check it below.

- Broom theology (a culture where everyone looks for ways to pitch in, even when their own work is done)
- Umbrella of mercy (a safe environment for voicing risky ideas)
- Finish well (acting responsibly and finishing strong before you leave the organization)
- When something feels funky, engage (a reminder that when potential problems are ignored, they tend to grow larger)

If you selected an axiom above, think of a next step you'd like to take to develop it in your church or organization, and record your thoughts below.

3. Bill and Michael both shared axioms that were powerful revelations in their own lives, and that they've used to impact others. What is a next step you could take to further tap into the resource of your own stories to impact the lives of others? Choose one below, or write in your own.

- Spend time thinking about axioms that might be present in my own stories.
- Spend time crafting the words that would make an axiom pithy, memorable, and repeatable.
- Spend time working axioms into messages I'm delivering to others in order to lead them.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_