Howard Behar was the organisational leader who helped grow Starbucks from 26 stores to a world-renowned brand with thousands of stores worldwide. His book is an inspiring story of fostering humanity in an organisation. Behar describes his leadership principles, illustrated with stories of where Starbucks put people first while juggling challenges of exponential growth. It is interesting because it is about coffee but relevant because its principles are applicable to church. Behar prompted me to ask dozens of questions about humanity in church life.

He places a big priority on people, teams, trust and caring like you really mean it: “People come before the coffee. After all, people grow the coffee, choose the coffee, ship the coffee, roast the coffee, brew and serve the coffee – and enjoy the coffee” (p.136). His passion prompted me to see people as more important than my resume as pastor, and to ask how can I cultivate that attitude in others? How can I grow a fruitful church and not compromise my sense of humanity? How can I make a big deal of each person?

He counsels knowing who you are – wear one hat and be clear about your values, purpose and goals. Rather than trying to do too many things, it reminded me to ask what will make a church ‘feel most deeply and vitally alive’ and in tune with what God is calling us to?

Behar counsels listening attentively – the walls talk, so keep your ears and eyes open for organisational insights. How do I make space to hear people’s hearts, to invite them to share what is on their minds? How can we ensure good communication between denomination and churches, between pastors and members, and between churches and their communities? Starbucks’ purpose is to build bridges among people – the fairtrade coffee, trained staff, comfortable seating, ambient music, diverse products and excellent service all enhances that. What do the walls say about the vibe of our churches?

He encourages independent thought in teams – the person who sweeps the floor should choose the broom, so get rid of as many rules as you can and empower people to do what it takes. Similarly in church, how can we empower leaders to transform their communities?

And Behar says dare to dream – to say yes, the most important word in the world to open people up to big goals, joys and hopes. How can we better cultivate in our churches a culture of permission and possibility to resource people in their dreams?

Behar’s leadership story at Starbucks is about fostering creativity, energy, passion, mutual care and respect for humanity as part of its organisational culture – inspiring lessons to consider for our churches.

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_Howard Behar, It’s Not About the Coffee: Lessons on Putting People First from a Life at Starbucks (New York: Portfolio, 2005)_