



Creative Small-Group Leader Training

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How to Use This Resource

I can still remember attending my very first small-group leader training event. It was an overnight event that included sharing stories of life-change, racing through an obstacle course, making s'mores around a campfire, brainstorming our next small-group studies, and welcoming new leaders. It was a fun-filled event that made all the leaders feel appreciated and cared for. On top of that, we left feeling prepared to take the next step in our leadership role.

Meaningful training events leave leaders inspired and excited—not just informed. This resource will help you plan a successful, meaningful training event for your small-group leaders.

Principles of Successful Training Events

Learn from people who have been doing this for years including Jay Firebaugh, Mark Ingmire, Scott Nelson, and Terry Powell. They'll share their wisdom on creating well-attended, successful training events.

Activities for Training Events

In this section, you'll find a collection of fun activities to be used at training events. Your small-group leaders can even use them with their groups.

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Get Creative!

The risks and rewards

By Ed Young

Several years ago, a generous church member invited me to go with him to watch a heavyweight fight in Las Vegas. I couldn't help but notice the signs. They're everywhere: big signs, little signs, blinking, flashing, moving signs, even talking signs. It was dazzling.

They don't have a lot to say, but they definitely know how to say it, I thought.

It's just the opposite in the church. We have everything to say, but we don't always know how to say it. We fail to communicate God's truth in a way that is both biblically based and culturally compelling. Consequently, many people view church as a dry, yawn-filled environment. And too many Christians, even church leaders, are just droning through life—doing the same thing the same way and expecting a unique result.

When I was young, I remember saying to myself, "If that's what being a Christian leader is all about, then no thanks."

Ten years ago I moved to the Dallas-Fort Worth area to begin a church. We started with a core group that shared the same vision: to keep God's unchanging truth the same, while communicating it in a radically different style. As we reached out to the people around us in creative ways, people we could never have dreamed of touching began attending. We wholeheartedly believe that, more than any other venue, creativity should be at its best when Christians are together within the context of the local church.

Creativity is biblical. In fact, it's the fifth word in the Bible: "In the beginning, God *created*." God invented creativity. He thought it up.

Jesus modeled it, always changing his approach. "He did not say anything to them without using a parable" (Matthew 13:34). He spoke from hillsides, boats, and beaches. He drew in the sand, turned over tables, picked up a coin, pointed to a sower, and set a child on his lap. Ultimately, he used the cross to communicate his love for us.

For us, it's so tempting to fall into sameness. We ignore Christ's example and do the same thing time after time, and people grow tired of it. How can we claim to follow an innovative God and be so boring? The church must be creative because people need it. How will Christians grow and mature if the church is stuck in a rut?

Creative Risks

Beware: creativity can have a dark underbelly. If not kept in its proper place, it can spin wildly out of control. And even with the best intentions, problems will occur and you will make mistakes. Accept that and don't let fear of failure paralyze you. Learn from your mistakes and move forward. Here are a few of the cautions we keep in mind.

1. Help! Message Overboard! This is by far the most dangerous pitfall. Creativity must be controlled by the rudder of relevant biblical truth. The Bible should drive our creativity; creative technique must not drive the biblical message. Biblically driven teaching is the priority that never changes. I am motivated to be creative by seeing people come to Christ. Don't fall into the trap of trying to top yourself, getting bigger and flashier, at the expense of your message. If an idea doesn't serve to underscore the theme, then it's not necessary. If you have to explain it too much, then it's probably a distraction, and best avoided.

2. Stranded in a Sensory Storm. It's possible for a training event to be too busy. Too many elements, even if they are all good ideas individually, generate a sensory storm that clouds the message. Know when enough is enough and even cut back at times. Every so often—usually after a particularly multi-sensory event—we go back and do a simple, unadorned event. A basic meat-and-potatoes training will make the more creative events stand out.

3. Breaking the Bank. It's easy to get excited about creative ideas and start throwing lots of money at them, but it's better to use the resources around you. When we had an idea to use a sports car as a sermon illustration, we turned to a car dealer in our congregation to help us out rather than trying to rent one. It's a fallacy that you have to be a big church with lots of money to be creative. Sometimes creativity can be more intimate in a smaller gathering because the audience can see a small object or photograph. You can also afford to give out small objects that serve as reminders. For example, when our church was smaller, we did a "Juicy Fruit" series on the fruit of the Spirit. We handed out pieces of the gum to illustrate the sweetness of spiritual fruit in your life.

4. A Long Day's Voyage. Creativity is fun. It turns boring routine into something challenging and exciting. At the same time, creativity is draining. The process of implementing a creative idea takes an enormous amount of time, thought, and energy. For me, there is nothing so demanding as thinking creatively. It requires both commitment and a tireless work ethic to take God's truth from the complex to the simple.

5. Flee the Shallows of Creative Sameness. It's possible to get stuck in a rut even while being creative. Looking back, I can see that at times we floundered, doing the same "creative routine" every time—always using drama or the same music.

6. Navigating Without a Map. Creativity naturally involves risk-taking, but make sure that what you do is culturally relevant and within moral and ethical bounds. I would not use

certain words, phrases, or movie clips, no matter what kind of point it could make, because I don't want to popularize something that promotes immorality. If you're considering something that's at all controversial, run it by some spiritually mature, trusted friends who will tell you the truth. Some illustrations, controversial or in poor taste, are not worth the fallout. As the leader, you must draw the ethical map, based on Scripture, and make the creative coordinates clear.

Worth the Risks

Despite the dangers, creativity has been well worth the efforts.

Recently we challenged our members to be more evangelism-driven. We called the teaching "Lifelines." We decorated the stage like a ship, with a railing draped in ropes and an anchor at one side. We showed video clips of dramatic water rescues.

My point was that too many Christians are content to sit on the deck, soak up the rays, and work on their spiritual tan, while their friends are drowning all around them. Instead, we should be throwing out lifelines. We may be the only lifeline in their life. I told the members to look under their chairs. There each person found a Life Saver candy. It symbolized someone they knew who needed a lifeline. The message to be a lifeline is powerful by itself, but it becomes personal and memorable when linked by a creative illustration to actual people who need a Savior.

Getting Started

A close friend of mine is a personal trainer. When we exercise together, he always changes the workout. We never do the same thing the same way twice.

I asked him, "Henry, why are we changing? One day it's curls standing, the next day curls on my back. Why do you change it?"

"Ed, have you heard of the Confusion Principle?" he asked. "If you stay with the same workout, your muscles get used to it and stop growing. But, if you confuse them—work them in different ways—they'll get stronger and grow."

So I've tried to apply this principle in the church. Change the way you teach the lesson. Change the way stories are shared. Change the order of things. Change the decorations and the themes. I'm not talking about radical stuff. Small tweaks will take you to giant peaks.

—ED YOUNG pastors Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas. This article is adapted from *Leadership Journal*; copyright 2000 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What is one fear you have about getting more creative with your training?
2. What might be the benefits of making your training events more creative?
3. How have you tried to be creative with training events in the past? What were the results?

Successful Leader Training Events

Twelve ideas for making the most of your time together

By Jay Firebaugh

Our leaders receive a lot of training up front, and they get a lot of on-the-job training as they serve as apprentices. We also shepherd and give input through ongoing coaching. But I believe there is still the need for ongoing training events that unify your team and keep leaders on the same page. The problem is that leaders are busy. You can't expect small-group leaders to come to meetings simply because you say they ought to put one more thing into their already over-stuffed schedule.

We call our ongoing small-group leader training events "Convergences" because we ask all of our small-group leaders, apprentices, coaches, and directors to converge a few times a year. Despite their busy schedules, our leaders have good attendance. Here are some practical ideas for making your ongoing leader training successful.

Take Away Obstacles

Ask leaders what time and day work best for them. Provide childcare. Send out the schedule of dates far in advance. Send e-mail reminders a couple of weeks ahead of time. The more you remove obstacles for leaders, the more likely they'll attend.

Have Food

I was amazed how often leaders mentioned the snacks in their feedback of Convergences. Truthfully, we don't do anything elaborate, but just like in small groups, food facilitates an environment of comfort. Whether you have a meal or just a few snacks, be sure to include some food.

Focus Your Subject

You can't cover everything under the sun, so pick one topic and stick to it. If you have too many points of emphasis, your leaders won't remember any of them. Cover one topic at a time and come back to your other ideas when planning for the next training event.

Keep It Practical

I work hard on creating a plan for our Convergences. I realize I only have a handful of times to give input to the majority of our leaders at one time, so I work to make sure we are covering things that will help them shepherd better. To find out my leaders' greatest training needs, I keep my ear to the ground by talking to leaders and coaches and visiting groups. My goal is that leaders will gain practical insights each time they attend Convergence.

Give Vision

Rick Warren says, "Vision leaks." Small groups can easily lose their vision and become places where people show up without a clear purpose. Leaders need to constantly remind people of the vision: being in biblical community, working together to be missional, using our spiritual gifts, and growing closer to and more obedient to God. In order for small-group leaders to share that vision with their groups, they have to be given vision continually.

Give Encouragement

Leading a small group well is hard work! Small-group leaders are on the front line of pastoring our people, and it can be frustrating and discouraging at times.

Encouragement is the fuel of spiritual champions, so fill up their tanks every chance you get.

Make Every Minute Count

We try hard to communicate that we value our leaders' time. We don't over pack our meetings by allowing only 30 minutes for two hours of material. We also don't hold meetings just for the sake of having regular meetings. Additionally, we always start and stop our meetings on time. Convergences are 75 minutes long, and I work hard to make every minute valuable.

Feature Different Voices

We always have several different people share during the training event. For instance, anytime I hear of a small group that's had success, I ask them to share their story. When people hear from different speakers, they are able to pay attention better. Plus, hearing a similar message from multiple people from different viewpoints helps the message sink in.

Stay on the Same Page

I think a huge value of Convergences is keeping everyone connected to the overall plan of small groups. It's easy for leaders to be aware of just their group members, but they need to be reminded they are part of something bigger. They need to feel part of a shared vision and know that they are not alone in leadership.

Introduce New Ideas

Anytime I hear of people in our area doing something better or different in their small-group ministry, I get together with them to learn from them. If I think there are parts that could be utilized in our small groups, I invite them to a future Convergence to share with my leaders.

Create Expectation and Benefit

Our Convergences are not "mandatory," but I do expect every person to do everything they can to be there. And that expectation is communicated. Because we stick to practical, needed information, we've created a track record of covering valuable things.

One leader said to me, "I don't want to miss because I want my group to benefit from the training and teaching. Each time I learn something new!" Help your leaders see the benefit of the event.

Use Other Mediums

Unfortunately, some leaders will have legitimate reasons they have to miss Convergence. To help them out, I write a recap of the main emphasis for each Convergence and post it as a Note on our Facebook page. It also becomes a place where leaders can comment and offer feedback on the topic and the day. We also utilize online training by recording the main speaker and posting it online through Vimeo. We place the video right on our website.

—JAY FIREBAUGH is the Director of Small Groups at New Life Church in Gahanna, Ohio; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Which of these tips especially resonate with you?
2. What two ideas will you implement for your next training event? What steps do you need to take?
3. What are the benefits of having all leaders present for a single training event? How can you communicate the benefits to your leaders?

Get Your Leaders to Attend Training Events

Training events that inspire and encourage

By Mark Ingmire

I feel like I've worked with some of the best small-group leaders in the world. Despite that, I still had issues with attendance at training events. While my first few training events were well-attended, attendance quickly dropped off. Through some conversations with leaders, I discovered that they felt the events were boring. There was poor attendance because I did the same agenda every time. So I set out to change. Over time, I have learned a few key principles that make our training events worth attending.

Create a festive environment.

Decorate the room and the tables. Choose decorations that are classy and express appreciation. Think through the decorations beforehand; don't just slap them together at the last minute. You might also create a theme for the training day. Then you can decorate the room around the theme.

Serve food at the event.

I know our leaders are enticed by a free meal from a well-respected local restaurant. In Savannah, we are fortunate to have Paula Deen's restaurant. That's all we have to say in our invitation; the leaders know there will be plenty of good southern food. We have also taken our training event to local resorts to serve them a nice meal. It does take planning in the budget, but, in our case, it's not significantly more than preparing the meal ourselves. Food helps to set a warm and relaxing atmosphere and assures that the leaders are focused on the training instead of a hungry stomach.

Guest speakers make training events more interesting.

While point people, coaches, and other leaders from your church can and certainly should take an active role in the event, the training doesn't have to rest completely on you. Guest speakers can come from within your congregation or from another congregation. We have our senior pastor talk to our small-group leaders at least every other year. His talk sets the bar on the lifestyle we expect our leaders to live. We also have had him cast vision for the direction of the church and the role small-group leaders play to achieve that vision. Our speakers also include small-group point leaders from churches whose ministry is one step ahead of ours.

Sometimes less is more.

We used to give the majority of time to a main speaker. We learned, however, that even with great speakers, giving them too much time may be too much of a good thing. Now we shorten the speaking time—even to just 20 minutes sometimes—and we've received good feedback. While some topics do need a more extensive teaching time, we no longer assume that the speaker will talk for the majority of the event.

Include time for your small-group leaders to interact with each other.

Most likely your small-group leaders don't spend a lot of time chatting about small groups with other leaders. When evaluating our training events, our leaders told our team that they look forward to the time they get to interact and "talk shop" with other small-group leaders. We call this "table talk time." During "table talk time" our leaders get to share challenges, best practices, and stories with each other. Morale builds as they hear advice from other leaders in the small-group trenches.

Have fun.

The knee-jerk reaction of leaders, hearing that there will be a training event, is to assume it will be boring. We've learned that we need to have fun at each training event. One thing we do on a pretty consistent basis is give out prizes that range from a box of brownies to board games to resources—all things they can use with their small groups. Sometimes we give these prizes away through drawings. Other times we use the prizes to award groups that have met for the longest or shortest time, have added people in the past month, or have the most kids.

We have also used ideas from Minute to Win It. (You can find ideas on the [Minute to Win It website](#).) The best part: there are many ideas that work for all ages and skill sets, so all your leaders can participate.

Tell stories of life change that happened through your small groups.

Make it a practice to collect life-change stories from small-group leaders. Then share them on a regular basis with your leaders. Training leaders in a specific skill is good, but sharing a life-change story inspires them in ways that no skill training can. We try to share at least one story at each training event. Sometimes we record it and show it on video; other times we have people share in person. Regardless, we always communicate the stories in a way that shows appreciation to our leaders.

Collaborate with others.

Check out what other ministries in your church do to train leaders. Take notes on what works well, what makes the training fun, and what inspires their ministry leaders. Take their best ideas and make them work for your training event. This will keep your training events new, interesting, inspiring, and motivational.

Communicate over and over again.

While our leaders are great and very loyal, they also get a lot of mail and e-mails. We have found that it takes at least five points of contact from our small-group ministry asking them to RSVP to have most of our leaders actually show up to a training event. So we start with a brief e-mail followed by a mailing, another e-mail, a reminder postcard, and a final e-mail or phone call to those who haven't responded yet. For whatever reason, five seems to be the special number.

We've learned the hard way about holding successful, inspiring, worthwhile training events, but I hope you'll gain from our experiences. Be willing to try new things, get feedback from your leaders, and try again. Find out what they most need and what draws them to your events.

—MARK INGMIRE is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What have you done at past training events to appreciate your leaders? What was the response?
2. How much time do you usually allow for fun and games? How might having fun together help you reach your training goals?
3. What are some ways you can set a festive environment for your next training event? What food should you offer? What decorations would work for your theme? Who can help you set up the space?

Information, Imagination, Inspiration

Indispensable elements for training small-group leaders

By Scott Nelson

It seems like every time I ask someone to be a small-group leader I hear the same question: What kind of training will I get? They want to know they'll be given the tools they need to succeed. But training is tricky—even if you can lead a group as naturally as you brush your teeth, training others takes a different skill set.

I realized early on that I didn't really have that skill set. I could teach, communicate, and craft master strategies for changing the world through small-group ministry, but I knew nothing about training people. My initial approach was to mimic the way I had always been trained: classroom-based lecturing, PowerPoint presentation included. The deficiencies of my approach were soon evident and I started to incorporate other training models.

I tried turbo groups, one-on-one coaching, manuals, holding monthly training dinners, observing of leaders in group meetings, and apprenticing. I've learned that regardless of the training approach, there are three indispensable elements for training small-group leaders: information, imagination, and inspiration. My natural tendency early in my training experiences was to focus solely on information. If I could just get the right information to my leaders-in-training, they would be fully equipped to change the world through their small group. I have since learned two things: (1) my information—no matter how good—doesn't stick unless I help leaders imagine what it looks like to actually use the information, and (2) imagination and information require inspiration before they translate into action.

Information Enables Understanding

I learned the hard way that information is not the only element required to train small-group leaders. That does not mean, however, that information is unnecessary. In fact, we need to learn how to communicate information clearly and involve the trainees in the process.

Communicating Information Well

If information isn't communicated well, it will not be received well. This is a simple truth with significant implications for training. You can glean information from all the experts, from powerful stories of real experiences, and from the truth of Scripture, but it will be useless to your leaders if you don't communicate the information well.

My own advice for communicating important information to your leaders is this: be simple, creative, and repetitive. Select just a few key points, even if there is a lot of other supporting material. Then find creative ways to share those points such as handouts,

videos, PowerPoint, case studies, activities, and discussion questions. If you find yourself talking most of the time, mix in other learning activities. And when you do, repeat, repeat, repeat your key points. If you want your communication to be clear, repeat it as much as possible. You don't have to say it exactly the same way each time, but you do have to say it a lot.

Drawing Out Information Well

Too often we communicate information at training events through one-way communication: we talk, everyone else passively listens. There are situations when one-way communication is the only or best option, but greater learning happens when a trainer involves the trainees. I like to think of this as drawing out information from the leaders—information they may not recognize they have.

Two practices help to drawing out information from those you wish to train: asking good questions and facilitating (or steering) the conversation toward clear conclusions. For instance, if you are training your small-group leaders on ways of creating community within a group, you can ask, "In your experience, what helps people connect in small groups? What makes them feel disconnected?" As the leaders answer your question, repeat back to them what they are saying so that they know you heard them. After several answers have been given, summarize what you are hearing and ask the group if the conclusions you have identified accurately reflect their thoughts on the matter. If necessary, you can then supplement their conclusions with other conclusions you feel are important to stress. For instance, they may have come up with social events and weekly e-mails but missed the role social media can play.

Besides helping the information "stick," this type of teaching affirms that the leaders are capable and spiritually gifted, and that their experiences matter.

Imagination Enables Envisioning

In my experience, information lies dormant until it is fused with imagination and inspiration. Without imagination, small-group leaders will not be able to envision how the information should impact their life, role, and group. The goal of imagination is to enable leaders to envision the way things could be.

Encourage Imagination

I've often found that people don't often feel the freedom to use their imaginations. So the first step in encouraging imagination is often giving them "license" to imagine. When I train leaders, I want them to know they have license to imagine how the training, resources, and vision apply to their specific contexts. I want them to take the principles and use their imagination to decide how they best apply to their groups.

Develop Imagination

My experience has also taught me that I need to do more than simply encourage leaders to be imaginative—I need to develop their imagination. To help develop imagination I will often tell stories of how others have been imaginative. I also love to ask people to draw pictures of what the future could look like if they put their training into action. I then ask them to explain their picture to me and to any others who are present.

Drawing pictures has proven to be a powerful way to teach people how to use their imagination, but it is just one of many options. You might also use Play-Doh, sticky notes, or paper and scissors. What other methods can you use? What might it look like for you to encourage your leaders to use their imagination to envision the way things could be? You'll need to answer these questions if you want to help your leaders imagine what their groups could look like.

Inspiration Enables Transformation

Inspiration is the element that enables leaders to transform the way things are. Training that does not inspire will never lead to any meaningful development in the leader or change in the group. Inspiration provides the energy necessary for the conversion of information and imagination into action. Those responsible for training future leaders need to develop ways to spark and sustain inspiration in their leaders.

Spark Inspiration

At the 2007 Willow Creek Leadership Summit, Bill Hybels said, “The single most powerful way to motivate the people around you is to live a motivated life in front of them.” I think he is right. Nothing is more inspirational than an inspired person; nothing is more contagious than the life of an inspired leader. Good leaders can only effectively train other leaders if they maintain their own inspiration for the mission at hand. If you want to train small-group leaders, be passionate for the vision behind your ministry and inspired in the way you live your life.

Sustain Inspiration

Visions leak, fires fade, and energies wane—these are simply truths of life. Any training plan needs to take into account that inspiration must be sustained over the long haul. The charismatic, inspired leader may provide the spark that enables others to catch fire and transform the way things are, but you'll need a carefully crafted training plan to sustain the fire. You can keep the fire blazing by celebrating leaders' successes and ministry successes, telling stories of life change, and honestly recognizing failures, mistakes, and areas of improvement.

Don't Forget to Be Intentional

At a recent event in Dallas, I was training residents of the Forge Mission Training Network to live as Spirit-led leaders in their local contexts. Before I started the information portion of the training, I asked participants to create and act out short skits of what they thought Spirit-led leadership looked like.

The information portion began with sharing stories of how the Holy Spirit led people in Scripture. I employed creative means like discussion, videos, and a small-group study. In order to draw out information from them, I asked them to draw pictures, write phrases, and identify one biblical text that summarized the way the Spirit led people. We ended the session by sharing our imaginations with the larger group so that we could help one another develop our visions and make them a reality.

At the conclusion of the weekend I played one of the most inspiring videos I have ever seen. The video features one person standing against injustice and calling for God's people to wake up. I told the group that I saw each one of them as being that person. I went on to explain to them the sacrifice I was making to be in Dallas with them. It was just days before my wife was due to deliver our first child. I shared that I believe that as they explore how to live on mission for God and how to lead others to do the same, they are changing the world. How could I possibly skip a chance to be a part of that?

My training that weekend wasn't especially original, but I was intentional about including information, imagination, and inspiration. And I believe this method helped them to imagine the possibilities and implement a plan to make it happen.

—SCOTT NELSON is the Director of Theology for [ForgeAmerica](#); copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Which of these three do you usually spend the most time on? The least?
2. How much thought had you given to imagination in leader training prior to reading this article? Why is imagination a critical element of leader training?
3. In what ways can you incorporate these three components into your next training event?

More Is Caught than Taught

Intentional modeling during leader training events

By Terry Powell

Modeling has long been hailed as the primary means of a leader's influence. Paul told Timothy (1Timothy 4:12) and Titus (Titus 2:7) to serve as examples of the faith and values they desired for their flocks. Peter exhorted elders to be positive examples (1 Peter 5:3), and Jesus insisted that a learner, when fully trained, will *be like* his teacher (Luke 6:40). Indeed, more is caught than taught.

As you lead small-group leaders you not only demonstrate positive character and trust in the Lord, but also the skills and concepts that you desire them to implement in their groups. They're more likely to do what they observe or experience than simply what they hear during training.

I vividly recall attending a workshop called "Better Bible Discussions" at a large Christian education conference. The workshop leader lectured the entire time about how to form and ask different types of questions. His expertise and input was an essential element, yet he failed to demonstrate the questioning skills he wanted us to implement. My experience convinced me that the learning process we employ is as important as the content we convey.

When it comes to training small-group leaders, we need to be intentional about modeling the aspects of small-group meetings that we most want to see. Here are some ideas.

Small-Group Value:

- Create a warm, hospitable, and personable environment.

Training Strategy:

- Greet each participant by name as he or she enters the meeting room.
- Serve coffee and snacks as participants arrive.
- Start the meeting with a mixer or icebreaker.

Here's one idea to start the event:

One-Item Introductions. Ask participants to select one item from their wallet or purse to use in introducing themselves such as a photo, receipt, or business card. Give them time to display and explain the item. Encourage others to ask probing questions that elicit even more information. (If your group is large, have participants do this activity in groups of 4–6.)

Discuss these questions:

- Why did I start our time together with this kind of activity? What purpose did it serve?
- What words describe the kind of small-group environment we want to cultivate?
- What can you do to cultivate that type of environment in your group?

Small-Group Value:

- Group members should share authentically.

Training Session Strategy:

- Share your own needs, feelings, or life circumstances when appropriate.
- Weave in personal anecdotes during training—let them learn from mistakes as well as successes.
- Allow for times when leaders can share authentically with one another.

Here's one idea to promote authentic sharing:

Brief Bible Study

During the Bible study, strive to promote transparency by selecting a couple of questions from the following list. Add them to your passage-specific questions, and reserve them for the final minutes of the session. Be sure to share some of your own answers with the group. They'll feel more comfortable because you've opened up on a personal level. Discuss together or break into smaller groups.

- What personal application has the Lord given you from this study?
- What personal need or issue has the Holy Spirit exposed during this study? How can we pray with you about it?
- Who can illustrate one of our lesson's truths from your personal experience?
- What fresh insight(s) did you glean from the study?
- What unresolved questions on this subject do you have?

Small-Group Value:

- Intercession is a significant element of effective small groups.

Training Session Strategy:

- Start the event by having three or four people pray for the day
- Set aside a portion of the day for leaders to pray for one another—for their roles and for personal needs
- Pray for your leaders regularly and e-mail them to let them know

Here's one idea to stress the importance of intercession:

Study Epaphras and Nehemiah

To cover the importance of intercession in their groups, examine Colossians 4:12–13 and Nehemiah 1:1–11. Ask these questions:

- What traits described Epaphras and Nehemiah?
- Why are these particular traits essential to the ministry of intercession?

- What insights about intercessory prayer do these texts offer?

Prior to the training session, study these Bible passages and record your own answers to the questions. Then supplement the leaders' findings as needed.

How Can I Model This?

No matter what topics you cover in training, ask yourself the following questions as you prepare:

- During the training time, how can I model the skills, leadership traits, or elements of small-group life that I want them to implement?
- How can I show or demonstrate what I want them to do as group leaders?
- What activity or approach will allow them to experience or observe a vital trait, skill, or aspect of group life?

—TERRY POWELL teaches Christian Education and Bible at Columbia International University in South Carolina. For more information, see drterrypowell.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How often do you model small-group elements during your training events?
2. What values might you have unintentionally modeled through your training methods—values that contradict what you're trying to teach about small groups?
3. What value(s) do you want to model at your next training event? What will you do to make sure those values are modeled?

Seeking God When Serving

Five devotionals to use at training events

By Terry Powell

Thirty-five years after I first heard his words, Ronald Dunn's remark still resonates with me: "You can be in love with God's work without being in love with him." I hear it several times a year when my ministry activities ramp up to a fever pitch and I start skimping on my time alone with God. The Holy Spirit whispers his words, not to condemn me, but to remind me of what's more important. It's his way of wooing me back, of telling me that he misses fellowship with me.

Too often we leaders can let service for God eclipse having a relationship with him. In order to draw your small-group leaders' attention back to God, use one of these devotionals with them at your next training event.

Open Hearts

Acts 16:13–14

12–15 minutes

Acts 16 opens with Paul's second missionary venture. The Holy Spirit eventually led Paul and his team to Philippi. Pick up the story by examining verses 13–14, which describes Lydia's response to the message of Christ.

- What insight about ministry can we learn from these words: "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message"?
- When have you depended on your own strength and talents to do God's work? What was the result?
- What steps can you take to invite the Holy Spirit into your preparation and into your group meetings?

Whether we're sharing the gospel with folks who don't know Christ, leading group members, or volunteering in children's ministry, this holds true: ministry is not merely a human endeavor. God's Spirit must work in the hearts and minds of people for our ministry efforts to mean anything. If our effectiveness ultimately depends on the Holy Spirit, not merely our own abilities and preparation, then we need to pray. Ask God to give you direction and vision, and pray individually for your group members on a regular basis, asking God to work in their hearts and minds. Consider this quotation from W. E. Sangster: "God's work, apart from prayer, produces at best clever ineffectiveness."

Source of Significance

Luke 10:1–20

12–15 minutes

Read the passage. Jesus delegated ministry to 72 followers, who witnessed in teams of two. Apparently their labors succeeded, because they returned joyful, citing victories over demonic activity.

Consider Jesus' response to their report, shown in verse 20: "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

- According to Jesus, what is our most important reason to rejoice?
- Write several sentences that capture the perspective Jesus wanted to instill in these followers.

God's work is a valid source of joy. We're told to "to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 10:12). But a more vital basis for joy and significance is what he did for us on the cross. None of his blessings on our work, none of our accomplishments as leaders, can compete with his gift of salvation.

Thank him right now for this truth: the source of your identity and worth isn't your leadership role, nor what you do for him or others; rather, it's what he's already done for you! You are "Abba's child"! Serve today with an awareness of what he has accomplished, knowing that your worth does not rest on your accomplishments as a leader.

Passing the Test

Proverbs 27:21

12–15 minutes

As you lead, chances are someone in your group will tell you how helpful your leadership is to him or her. When you receive a compliment, remember that it's a test: "A person is tested by being praised" (Proverbs 27:21, NLT). Occasionally God's Spirit prompts a person to pay a compliment or inform us of the positive effect of our leadership. The Lord knows when we need such reminders of our usefulness in order to boost our confidence and revive our spirit.

- When is the last time you received a word of praise for your ministry? Pause and thank the Lord for using that person to be a channel for his encouragement of you.

Proverbs 27:21 implies that words of praise can also have an adverse effect.

- In what sense is another's praise a test?
- How does a leader fail that test?

The next time someone compliments you, whisper a silent prayer of gratitude to the Lord. Memorize Proverbs 27:21 so the Holy Spirit can bring it to mind each time you receive praise. Ask the Lord to protect you from the encroachment of a proud or self-sufficient spirit.

The Snare of Success

2 Chronicles 26

25–30 minutes

This chapter captures the sobering story of King Uzziah, who started well for the Lord, yet finished poorly. After reading the chapter, ponder these questions:

- What were the evidences of Uzziah's success?
- What words from the text suggest reasons for his success?
- What happened inside Uzziah as a result of his success?
- In what ways did pride show in Uzziah?
- What were the ultimate consequences of his pride and disobedience?

God gave Uzziah success as a leader. He sought the Lord and depended on him—until he began reading his own positive reviews! Even God's blessings can cause pride to surface in our hearts. Left unchecked, pride causes a downward moral spiral. According to this passage, pride shows an unwillingness to be held accountable and a defiance of God's law. What happened to Uzziah occurs too often among Christian leaders.

- What are some evidences of God's recent blessings on your ministry? How would you describe your response to those blessings? Pause right now and tell God how much you appreciate those blessings.
- Examine your heart. Is there any evidence that pride has surfaced as a result of your success?
- Other than the evidences in 2 Chronicles 26, in what additional ways does a proud spirit show in a leader?
- What can you do to minimize the likelihood of developing a proud spirit?

As you pray for effectiveness in your leadership, also ask the Lord to keep you humble and instill a spirit of gratitude. Memorize Isaiah 66:2: "These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word."

Paul's Definition of Ministry

Colossians 1:24–29

25–30 minutes

In verses 24–27 of this passage, Paul mentions his suffering for the gospel and cites his calling to preach. He insists that the hope of glory is "Christ in you." Then in the final two verses he describes his ministry in more detail, unveiling a principle pertinent to every leader and trainer. Hone in on verses 28–29 to answer these questions:

- What words in these verses reveal the nature or elements of Paul's ministry?
- What words indicate that Paul worked hard at his ministry?
- What terms pinpoint the source of Paul's energy and explain his effectiveness?
- Using these verses, write a one-sentence definition of "ministry."

Verse 28 cites Paul's proclamation of the gospel, as well as his emphasis on bringing folks to maturity by admonishing and teaching them. In verse 29 he refers to his labor and struggle, from Greek words connoting diligence and intensity. This verse also shows the source of Paul's capacity for service. He cites Christ's energy "which so powerfully works in me." What the Lord was doing inside Paul made his extensive output possible. Apparently, his output for the Lord was balanced and fueled by input from the Lord. In that vein, Ronald Dunn described ministry as "my putting out what God is putting in."

- To what extent is your output for God fueled by your input from him?
- When small-group leaders spend energy leading their group, yet neglect time alone with God, how might this show?
- When output for the Lord eclipses personal time in the Word and prayer, what does this suggest about our priorities? Our motives?

—TERRY POWELL teaches Christian Education and Bible at Columbia International University in South Carolina. For more information, see drterrypowell.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Fun with Ancient Runes

A creative way to get people thinking about knowledge and behavior

By Sam O'Neal

Purpose: To help group members recognize the connection between information and actions.

Supplies: You will need five or six long, straight objects that can be shaped into different patterns. These can be sticks, pencils, rulers, and so on.

Activity: This is a fun activity that works best with a group of no more than 10 people. If you have more people involved in your training session, you will need to teach the secret below to a few others and have them lead additional groups.

Gather everyone together and announce that you have an interesting challenge—you are going to teach the group about ancient runes, but you will do so in an unorthodox way.

Here's a basic overview of what you want to say to help the group get interested:

The ancient Americans had a very sophisticated system of numbers and numerology, but because they didn't have pencils and papers and calculators, everything was done with patterns and runes. I'm going to teach you some of those runes today.

[At this point, get out your five or six pencils, sticks, or whatever objects you're using.]

I'm going to use these pencils to show you several runes that were used by the ancient Americans. Each rune will represent a number from one to ten. You won't know which number the runes are showing at first, but eventually you will see that everything is based on a central pattern. Once you identify the pattern, you will be able to tell what number is represented by each rune I show you.

At this point, arrange the pencils into some kind of geometric pattern. It doesn't matter how you arrange them at all—just something that looks interesting.

Here's the trick: when you finish shaping the pencils into a "rune," you place both of your hands on your knees and display a number with your fingers. For example, if you wanted to

display the number 3, you would hold out three fingers on your left hand, but leave your right hand as a fist. If you wanted to show the number 8, you would show all five fingers on your left hand and three more fingers on your right hand. Be subtle with the placement of your fingers so that you don't give away the secret too easily.

Once you have your "rune" in place and your fingers showing a number, ask the group if anyone can guess what number the rune represents. People will guess several different numbers, and you say, "No, this is actually a 3." Keep going like this for a couple of rounds. If people start complaining or pestering you for more information, just tell them: "You have to be observant. Look closely for the pattern and you will see it."

Important: As you go along, emphasize that people who figure out the pattern need to keep it a secret. You don't want one person to catch on and blurt out the solution to the whole group.

Eventually, some of your group members will notice that the numbers on your fingers match the numbers of what the rune supposedly represents. They will get excited and probably say something like "I got it!" Again, make sure they don't give anything away yet. Have them guess the number represented by a couple of runes (to make sure they didn't have a lucky guess), and then commend them for figuring out the pattern. You can even have them put together a few runes and lead the group for a while.

As more and more people figure out the secret, things will become more and more relaxed for the people "in the know." Those who are still unable to guess the pattern, however, will probably become frustrated. Don't allow any taunting or anything similar—keep things fun. But note those who seem to be irritated or frustrated so that you can get their reactions later.

If this activity goes on for more than 10 or 15 minutes, you may need to start giving out some clues to help the stragglers figure out the secret of the game. Waggle your fingers a bit on your knees. Or tell them to "keep an eye on my hands to see the pattern."

When everyone has figured out the pattern, move on to the Unpacking questions.

Unpacking:

- What were your first impressions when I told my story about the ancient Americans and their "runes"?
- How did you feel before you figured out the secret?
- How did you feel after you figured it out?
- What changed in your behavior after you figured out what the pattern was? Why did you act differently?
- Did anyone get frustrated or irritated during the activity? Why?

- How does this activity connect with the idea of applying biblical truths?

—SAM O'NEAL is a former managing editor of www.SmallGroups.com and the author of *[Field Guide for Small Group Leaders](#)*; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Prayer Stations

Ten methods of prayer to inspire leader to think outside the box

By Amy Jackson

Let's face it: sometimes our prayer lives get boring. We pray for the same things in the same way, and we forget that we're talking with the creator of the universe. There is something significant about experiencing God through prayer, and sometimes we need to pray in a new way to get out of our prayer ruts. Praying for something we don't normally pray about, allowing a visual to take us deeper into prayer, giving ourselves time to listen for God's voice, responding to God in a new way, or positioning our body in a new way can give us new glimpses of God and ourselves. Our hearts are opened to new ways of communicating with God, and that inspiration can carry over into our other relationships and our small groups.

While group prayer time can become routine and, dare I say, boring, sometimes leaders just need a little inspiration to make the group prayer time more meaningful. If they can experience new types or methods of prayer, their personal prayer lives can improve, and they can bring those new ideas to their groups.

Below you'll find a number of prayer stations—prompts and setups for different methods of prayer on different topics. For an activity during your training day that will give leaders both meaningful personal time and inspiring ideas, set up several of these prayer stations. Set up as many stations as fit your time and focus for the day. Provide ample resources at each station so all leaders can complete each station.

You may choose to play soft music in the background, light candles, or otherwise set a worshipful tone. Tell leaders they can spend as much time praying as they'd like at each station, and move on to the next station whenever they are ready. You may direct leaders to go through the stations in a certain order, or you may allow them to skip around depending on how you set up your stations. Decide how much time your leaders will spend on the prayer stations as a whole, and let them know ahead of time. You may also choose to ring a bell, make a quiet announcement, or turn down the music when five minutes remain so leaders know to finish their stations.

Prayer Stations

Washing Away My Sin. Place a vase filled with water on a table. Place several drops of red food coloring into the water and swirl or stir until the color is spread evenly throughout the water. Have small sheets of clear transparency paper and black washable markers available. Then provide this prompt:

Spend some time reflecting on unforgiven sin in your life, and write the sin on a sheet of transparency with a black washable marker. Then lift it up to God. After you have prayed about it, dip the transparency piece into the water in the vase until it has been fully washed away. Jesus' blood washes away your sins just as this water washes away what you've written.

Entangled Heart. You will need a net and several small hearts. The net could be a butterfly net, decorative netting from a craft store, or even a reusable produce bag—whatever you have available. The small hearts could be candy, hearts punched out of paper, or anything else you can think of. I found small wooden hearts at a craft store. Place the hearts in the net. Then give the following prompt to participants:

God has freed our hearts to live fully for him, but our hearts can get entangled by so many things. We focus on praise from others, having the clothes we desire, advancing our careers, being the best parents, or making ourselves happy with a multitude of things. We need to bring our hearts to God continually to allow him to free our hearts again.

What is entangling your heart at the moment? What is keeping it from being free as God intends? Lift up these issues to God in prayer. When you're finished talking to God about this issue, remove a heart from the net, visually representing that God has freed your heart. Keep the heart as a reminder of what God has done.

Let's Get Visual. Place paper and markers on a table. Provide a short passage of your choosing. You could use 1 Peter 5:1–4, Ephesians 3:14–21, or Philippians 4:4–9. Provide this prompt:

After reading through the passage, use the markers and paper to respond to the reading by drawing a picture. Consider: What is the main thing you learned from this passage? What questions do you have after reading this? How do you feel after reading this passage? What is God telling you through this passage?

Listening to God's Voice. Provide paper, pens, and this prompt:

What's been on your mind lately? What have you been praying about? Spend some time silently listening for God's voice. What does he want you to know? What response does he have to your prayers? What promise does he want to reassure you of? Then, spend time journaling about God's personal message for you right now.

Craft Stick Prayers. You will need several cups or mugs, a bag of craft sticks, and a fine permanent marker or pen. Write a different thing to pray for on each craft stick and place the sticks in the cups. You might choose to list specific ministry needs, specific leaders, countries around the world, government officials, community needs, or church-wide

concerns. Try to keep a theme for the requests, and think about what your leaders might not be praying for on a regular basis. Then, provide this prompt:

Sometimes we can limit our prayers to the same list of items day after day. God definitely wants to hear those prayers. But, prayer is also much bigger than the things we pray for on a regular basis. Choose several craft sticks from the cups and pray for the items on the sticks. Consider how often you pray for these items or people. Replace the sticks when you are finished.

Give It Away. You will need to provide small pieces of paper, pens, and a small garbage bin or basket that can sit on a table or chair. Provide the following prompt:

Read Matthew 11:28–30 and Luke 17:30–33. Jesus says we are to come to him, to give away the burdens the world places on us and those we place on ourselves, to take up his yoke. We can easily forget that we were not created to carry the heavy burdens we so often carry. We must go to God and give them to him. Jesus said that those who hold on too tightly will lose their lives, but those who let go will preserve their lives.

What are you holding on to unnecessarily? Are you carrying a burden that you need to bring to Jesus? Is there something in your life you are unwilling to relinquish to God? Write it on a piece of paper. Spend time in prayer, giving it over to him. When you're finished, rip the paper and throw it away in the trash can. It is no longer yours. God is holding it now.

God Will Provide. You will need sealable baggies and cornflakes cereal for this station. You may choose to place the cereal in a bowl on a table, spread out the flakes on a tabletop, or spread them across an area on the floor. Provide this prompt and the baggies near the cornflakes:

Read Exodus 16:11–31. One of the downfalls of living in a wealthy society is beginning to think that we have the power to provide for ourselves—that God is not at work, providing for each and every need. This familiar passage reminds us that God provides for our needs day-to-day. Where are you on this? Have you forgotten that God is providing for you? Pray a prayer of praise. Do you feel that God is not providing adequately, or as you would hope? Talk to God about your fear, anger, or concern. Are you worried that God will not provide in an area of your life? Lift up your worry to God. Then be reminded that God does provide. Collect some flakes and put them in a baggie. Keep this as a reminder that God provides for all our needs day-to-day.

Mind-Body Connection. This station needs some space for participants to move around. Provide this prompt:

So often prayer is simply an intellectual act. We think, we speak, we listen. But our bodies are connected to our minds and spirits, and positioning our bodies in different ways can help deepen our prayer. How do you normally position your body during

prayer? Do you sit with your hands clasped in your lap? Do you close your eyes and bow your head? Do you kneel?

Think outside the box. How are feeling? What kind of prayer do you want to raise to God? As you praise, stand up tall, lifting your hands to the sky, eyes raised. As you submit to God, lie on the ground or kneel. As you ask for God's provision, hold your hands in front of you with palms up. As you let go of worries and cares, hold your hands in front of you with palms down. Allow your body position to enhance and deepen your prayer.

Praise Together. Hang a poster board on the wall or provide a long sheet of paper on a table. Place a container of markers, chalk, crayons, or other writing utensils nearby. Provide the following prompt:

Psalm 9:1–2 says: "I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High." Take some time to think through all the ways God has been working in your life and the life of your group. What prayers have been answered? What blessings bestowed? What life-change has occurred?

Write or draw your praises on the poster board. Then take a moment to praise God for all the other praises on the poster board. Be encouraged that God is at work.

Moving Forward with Christ. This station will need slips of paper and pens. Provide this prompt:

Read Ephesians 3:14–21. This is a prayer Paul lifted for the church in Ephesus. He wanted them to be strengthened by the Spirit from the inside out, to be rooted and established in God's love, to take up the power of God, and to be filled with the fullness of God. There is a knowledge aspect, a heart aspect, and a spirit aspect. We could easily pray these same things for our groups. Where is your group with these things? Where do they need to grow? What are they struggling with? What is showing much fruit? Ask God what your next steps with your group should be. How can you help facilitate a deeper understanding of God's love, tapping into the strength of the Spirit, or taking up God's power? What specific goals should you have as the leader of this group? Pray that God will make this clear to you.

Use the paper slips to write down a few goals that God has brought to mind. What will you need in order to accomplish these goals? Will you need help from a coach, additional training, or another leader to hold you accountable? Decide what you will do to work with God to accomplish these goals.

After completing the activity, give leaders a copy of these station ideas and prompts for use in their own prayer lives and in their small groups. These prompts can also be used at retreats, with large groups, and with youth groups. Know that many of these can be modified to fit a number of situations. You might also use a single prompt during a small-group meeting or set up a few stations for a meeting dedicated to prayer.

Unpacking:

- What was this time like for you? Was it restful, peaceful, difficult, trying?
- Which prayer ideas were new for you? Which were your favorites?
- Which was most uncomfortable for you? Why?
- How might you incorporate some of these ideas into your small group?
- What other ideas can you come up with for creative prayer?

—AMY JACKSON is the Associate Editor of SmallGroups.com and a former small-group director. Copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Fun Icebreakers

Use these ideas in your training events

By various authors

Your leaders can benefit a lot from a little fun. Consider how you can insert moments of fun and team-building into your training events. Here are four to consider. For more ideas like this, use SmallGroup.com's [Meeting Builder Tool](#).

Puzzle Time

By Jenifer Aguilar

Supplies Needed:

Multiple identical puzzles of at least 20 to 50 pieces

Activity:

Form multiple groups of one to five. If you have more leaders than available groups, you can have them observe how the groups are accomplishing the task. Give each group a puzzle to work on. The first group to finish wins. Have them start at the same time. When the first group finishes, use the unpacking questions.

Unpacking Questions:

1. Did it surprise you which group finished first? Why or why not?
2. How did the different groups work to accomplish the task?
3. What are the advantages of working together as a group?
4. What might be the struggles of working together as a group? How can we overcome them?
5. Some people work better individually, especially introverts. Does working as a group always mean working together on the same task? How might working as a group involve some individual work?

A Construction Contest

By Sam O'Neal

Activity:

Before starting this activity, you'll need to gather a large supply of building materials. These could be actual blocks or Legos, or you could just use pillows and shoes and other items available in your meeting space. When people arrive, arrange them into separate teams of four to five people.

The goal of this activity is for each team to build a structure using the materials provided. It can be any kind of structure the team chooses—the only rules are that it must be resting on the floor, and it must be free-standing (nothing holding it up). The team with the tallest structure after five minutes of building will be declared the winner.

Unpacking Questions:

1. Have everyone examine the winning structure. What was the key to the winning team's success?
2. Was there anything different about the winning structure that allowed it to go higher?
3. What was your experience of working with a team? What role did you play on your team?
4. What team dynamics were helpful or difficult? Why?

Beach Ball Questions

By Kris Collins

Supplies:

A large beach ball and a permanent marker

Set up:

With the permanent marker, write fun icebreaker questions all over the ball. You might write questions like "What was your favorite job?" "If you could live anywhere, where would you choose?" and "What pets did you have while growing up?" Continue writing questions until the ball is covered.

Activity:

Have leaders stand in a large circle. Begin by tossing the ball to someone. The person must answer the question his or her right thumb lands on while catching the ball. When finished

answering, he or she tosses the ball to another person. Continue answering questions and tossing the ball for five to ten minutes, or until everyone has answered a question.

Stepping Out

By Tami Rudkin

Take your leaders outside to a grassy area or park. Assign each of them a number from one to ten, (more than one person can have the same number). Have the leaders stand in a circle facing outward instead of toward the middle of the group. Tell them that on the word "go" they are to take as many steps as the number assigned to them. When they have taken their steps, ask them to look around them and find one thing that reminds them of God's presence and work in their lives. Give them a minute or two. Have them turn around and walk back to the circle and share what they saw.

—Compiled by Amy Jackson; copyright 2005-2012 by Christianity Today.

Further Exploration

Resources to help you . . .

SmallGroups.com. We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples through life-changing community.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

CTPastors.com. A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders in pastoral roles.

WomenLeaders.com. A website ministering to women leaders in the church.

The Big Book of Team Building Games: Trust Building Activities, Team Spirit Exercises, and Other Fun Things

John Newstrom and Edward Scannell

McGraw-Hill, 1998

Find tons of ideas to use at leader training events.

Successful Small Groups

Teena M. Stewart

Beacon Hill Press, 2007

Explore the process of building and maintaining a growing community from concept to practice.

Coaching Life-Changing Small Group Leaders

Bill Donahue and Greg Bowman

Zondervan, 2004

This resource includes outlines for training events and coaching tips.