



Organize Your Small-Group Ministry

Organize Your Ministry

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How to Use This Resource

Most leaders involved in small-group ministry consider themselves relational. We like connecting with people and encouraging them to grow. Because our focus is on relationships, many of us let organization slide. We figure our time is better spent on investing in people rather than organizing the ministry.

But the truth is that an organized ministry allows us to shepherd and care for people more effectively. That's what Will Johnston has learned in his years leading a thriving small-group ministry, and he shares his hard-won wisdom with us in this training tool. You'll learn critical skills to help you organize, structure, and support your small-group ministry regardless of size, model, or context.

Get Set for Success

Whether you're just starting out or looking to take your small-group ministry to the next level, these articles will set you up for success. Find the right structure for your ministry based on size, how to build an effective team, and how to schedule your ministry calendar.

Ready to Change?

A key skill for small-group point people is knowing when it's time to change your ministry. Will Johnston explains both how to know when it's time to change and how to time that change for maximum effectiveness.

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Find the Right Structure for Your Ministry

A structure that's too small or too large will stunt your growth.

Will Johnston

If any organization is going to thrive, its systems must be able to sustain it. If the systems are too small for the size of the organization, they won't be able to keep up and chaos will result. If the systems are too large, they'll impede progress, grinding the operation to a halt.

Not anticipating growth will no doubt stunt your ministry. If you aren't searching for coaches for the additional groups you'll add in a few months, you won't be ready to launch healthy groups when you need them. But it's equally harmful to prepare too soon.

For instance, let's say you're focused on the day when your church will have 2,000 in Sunday attendance and about 200 small groups. When that happens you'll need two levels of coaches and lots of systems to keep track of group data and reports. But requiring all those extra coaches and database work now when you have 20 groups is a recipe for disaster. With so much time, effort, and money going into systems, you'll have no time or budget to directly support leaders. Plus, recruiting people to roles that aren't really needed is a surefire way to discourage future recruitment efforts.

Frankly, leaders would probably hate both the database and coaching system. They wouldn't understand why they had to fill out a report every week and go through two levels of ineffective "middle management" when there are still a small enough number of groups that most leaders can chat with you on Sunday mornings.

Find the Right-Sized System

Your system should both effectively support where you are now and handle the next step in your growth. In other words, whatever systems you have in place, whether they're coaching, logistical, or otherwise should be able to manage your current size well, but they should also be able to stretch to accommodate growth.

If you're running a small- to medium-sized group ministry, the systems that you need will be largely dictated by your answers to two questions.

How relational are you?

The more relational you are, the less "system" you need. If you're a highly relational person, you may be able to coach 70 leaders yourself. And keeping the systems to a minimum means that you'll have less logistical and organizational work taking up your time, leaving you to focus on coaching and caring for your leaders.

How organized are you?

Similarly, the more organized you are, the less "system" you need. This may seem a little counterintuitive because highly organized people tend to have systems to manage everything.

But I'm not talking about personal systems for managing your calendar or email. If you're organized and have those kinds of systems for yourself, you don't have to create a huge system that other people need to use.

Of course, no matter how qualified, competent, and passionate you are, there's a limit to the size of the ministry that you can run without implementing systems.

Guidelines Based on Size

Here's a look at the systems and structures needed to support group ministries of various sizes. Obviously, these are just rough guidelines. You may find you can get by on fewer systems longer or need more systems sooner, but this should give you a framework from which to start. For each size ministry, I offer suggestions for the kind of culture, management structure, and point leaders you'll need. These suggestions are based on the assumption that your church wants small groups to be a significant ministry where at least a third of the congregation is involved.

Startup Ministry

(0–20 Groups, 0–30 Leaders)

Culture

Your ability to make leaders feel like they're part of something meaningful and fun (although not necessarily easy), will be critical to success. The ministry should feel like a team. There should be a strong sense that you're all "in it together." This is especially important because resources are often scarce.

Management Structure

At this point you're probably on staff full-time at the church wearing three or four hats, on staff part-time, or a volunteer. From the beginning, start looking for a right-hand man or woman, someone who can begin to share the load with you, someone you can begin delegating things to.

At this stage, you're not really looking to have many systems, per se. Responsibilities will be divided based on skills, interests, availability, and relationships. There needn't be formal coaching assignments. You just care for the folks you have a stronger relationship with. The other person does the same. With only a few leaders, it's easy to know what everyone's up to.

Point Leader

At this early stage, the point leader needs to be relational and entrepreneurial. Most of the resources provided by the church and the leaders willing to come on board will be largely due to the point leader's relationships. It's less about systems and models and more about getting something started and keeping those involved interested.

Small

(21–40 Groups, 31–60 Leaders)

Culture

Leaders will still know each other, but they'll likely shift from feeling like a team to feeling like a community. There's camaraderie but not the same "back against the wall, fight to survive" ethos. The coaches you assemble, however, should have a team feel.

Management Structure

Hopefully by this point the church recognizes the value of groups and is able to pay someone at least part-time to run the group ministry. It is possible, though, for a high-capacity leader who is willing to give a lot of time to lead the ministry as a volunteer during this stage.

You'll want to be thinking intentionally about what a coaching system would look like and who might make good coaches. Start meeting with and investing in those people more intentionally and at some point float the idea of becoming a coach to them. Don't implement a formal coaching system, however, until you have 40 to 50 leaders.

When you have 21–40 groups, it's usually easiest to continue managing your groups and group sign ups pretty informally. Just check in with leaders and ask them what they're studying. Then update a spreadsheet or the website or wherever you store that info. If you have a lot of other responsibilities on staff or are a volunteer, however, you may need to put a more formal system in place to save time.

Point Leader

Similar to the startup phase, the primary strength of an ideal group ministry leader at this stage is *relational*. Systems are starting to develop, and vision is being set, but for now the primary need is for the point leader to be people-focused.

A second strength becomes crucial now: *recruiter*. Initially the ministry was built on the point leader's strong pre-existing relationships, but now there are enough people involved that point leaders need to go outside of pre-existing circles to recruit people they don't know as well.

Other Considerations

During this stage you'll want to refine and clarify your vision for small groups. Right now, that vision may seem intuitive, but as you move into the next stage, that intuition will quickly be lost. Without a clearly defined vision, people will fill that vacuum with whatever they think groups should do and be.

Medium

(41–100 Groups, 61–150 Leaders)

Culture

The medium-sized group ministry is a treacherous one. This is the point where the ministry can either thrive or fail. Leaders won't all know each other, and there will be leaders you don't know all that well. Systems and structures become increasingly important, and the pacing of their implementation is especially critical.

This is the stage where you'll be tempted to continue to do things the way you've always done them—even when it doesn't make sense to do so. Or you'll recognize that you can't keep doing things the same way, and you'll be tempted to over-systematize everything.

Management Structure

It's a rare volunteer who can effectively run a groups ministry at this size. Even a part-time staff member (or one with multiple hats) may have trouble effectively leading unless small groups are his or her main focus. At this stage, it's likely you'll have a full-time staff member and possibly even be looking to hire a second paid team member. That person might be an assistant or an assistant group pastor/director. The person that you bring on will be largely dictated by your own strengths and weaknesses. Do you need someone who can keep you organized and manage all of the details, or do you need a partner in ministry, someone who can share the pastoral workload?

You're also going to need a robust coaching system. Hopefully the system you designed in the small stage can carry you most of the way through this phase. Your role becomes more and more about caring for and investing directly in the coaches than the leaders.

You'll also start to lose your ability to be aware of what your leaders are doing, so you'll need to have a more formal group registration and management process. At this stage you may want to use a database system, but you might also consider doing something a bit less formal. Database systems often take more time than you think, so it's a good idea to delay using these until necessary. When National Community Church's group ministry was this size, we had a simple email form that our leaders could respond to, and that proved really effective.

Point Leader

During this stage there's a big shift in the strengths needed to lead the ministry. Relationships will always be key, but this is the stage where there's a lot of system-building going on, an increasing amount of data to manage, and a good chance that, at least in the first half of this stage, the ministry leader will be the only staff person working on groups. Consequently, the two characteristics most needed are *strategic* and *organized*.

No longer is it just about recruiting and caring for people. Instead, it's about building systems that will scale. The point leader must implement systems that empower others to do these tasks.

And now that things are a bit bigger, there are more details to keep track of, meaning that the point leader—assuming he or she doesn't have an assistant—needs to make sure those things don't fall through the cracks. Because when they do, it's not "details" that are falling through, it's people—like the guest interested in small groups who never got connected.

Other Considerations

During this phase you must make sure that your vision is nailed down. You may still be refining and tweaking it, but by the time this phase is drawing to a close, you need to have a laser focus.

Large

(101+ Groups, 151+ Leaders)

Culture

This can be an incredibly fun and exciting season. It's full of new leadership challenges, and you'll likely have the resources to do more than you did before. It's important to note, though, that unless you stretch yourself and grow as a leader, you'll put a cap on your ministry's growth.

Management Structure

You'll likely have a staff of two or three people including yourself when this phase begins (one or two of those may be part-time). And of course, the number of staff members you'll need will grow as the ministry grows.

If you don't already have a second layer of coaches (sometimes called super coaches or senior coaches), you'll probably need to implement them. If you've got 151 leaders, and each coach is expected to care for 10 leaders, you'll need at least 16 coaches. It's probably unrealistic for you to manage the ministry systems and invest personally in 16 coaches. Implementing a second layer of coaches will help with that. A simple way to do that is having your other staff members serve as senior coaches, but your systems may require something different.

Point Leader

There's a distinct leadership shift at this stage. No longer is the small-group ministry leader primarily responsible for on-the-ground ministry. Rather, the point leader must be a *visionary, strategist, team-builder, and influencer*.

Clarity of vision becomes more and more important. As an organization becomes bigger, vision drift is inevitable if someone is not continually reinforcing that vision. When the vision is unclear, people become disengaged because they're unsure why groups exist, or they fill the vision vacuum with their own vision for groups.

At this stage, carrying out the vision of the ministry is too much for you to do on your own, so you need to develop systems and strategies that empower others to implement the vision. That requires the point person to build a team of people. You have to bring the right people on the team and put them in the right seat. Then you have to be able to give those people a sense of purpose and provide direction. You'll need to know how to serve and lead that team effectively.

The importance of relationship also resurfaces in influence. Other pastors, staff, and elders aren't as invested in small groups as the point person, so you must use your influence with them to keep the vision for groups front and center. This is how you'll ensure groups receive the attention and resources they need to thrive.

Other Considerations

Effectiveness at this stage necessitates empowering and releasing others to do ministry, and while the ability to do that is a sign of a good leader, it's also at this point that the risk of becoming distant and disconnected is the greatest.

Leaders of large ministries need to lead groups regularly to make sure the joys and challenges of small-group leadership are always at the forefront of their minds. And they need to make sure that there's a group of leaders that they're directly responsible for so that they can keep their finger on the pulse of the ministry. These direct lines to on-the-ground ministry will help prevent point people from losing sight of the messiness that is an inherent part of small-group ministry.

—*Will Johnston is an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com and the former Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2016 by Christianity Today.*

Discuss

1. What size is your ministry? Are you on the verge of a new level of ministry?
2. How well does your current structure match the suggestions for your size ministry?
3. What do you need to implement in the next month to create a structure that supports a healthy ministry? What about in the next three months?

Structure for Creativity

Practical ideas to keep your small-group ministry flourishing

Will Johnston

Creativity is not cultivated from unfettered freedom but is rooted in the soil of systems and structure. We tend to think of creativity as something wholly spontaneous, resulting from the freedom to do anything we want anytime we want with no limits or boundaries. In reality, we are at our most creative when we have a structure, a firm foundation, a launchpad from which to pursue new ideas and begin new initiatives.

If you want to write, paint, compose, sculpt, or invent, you have to schedule time into your day to do that. If you don't, you'll always push it off until "later" or "tomorrow." As someone who has just recently transitioned out of a pastoral ministry role to pursue freelance writing, speaking, and consulting, I can tell you from personal experience that it's true. Even Franz Kafka, Maya Angelou, and Benjamin Franklin—some of the world's most creative people—followed strict daily routines.

A few years ago, my church did a campaign called A18 Neighborhoods in which we sought to serve the community in practical, tangible ways. We told our small-group leaders that their groups needed to be organized around a neighborhood. That could be an actual geographical neighborhood where they lived. It could be a "neighborhood" where they worked: business, law, politics, non-profit, education, etc. Or it could be a "neighborhood" where they played: tennis, basketball, movies, art, music and so forth. We gave leaders curriculum for these groups and asked them to do something to tangibly serve the neighborhood they were part of.

Prior to this, our groups had been operating on a free-market system, meaning that once someone was approved as a leader, they could lead just about any type of group they wanted. This campaign was a real shift. We placed more constraints on our leaders than we ever had before. Out of this campaign and its constraints, though, grew one of the most creative small groups we'd ever had.

Some of the artists at our church started a group that taught art to inner-city kids. They then came up with the idea to work with those kids to put on a benefit concert. The kids would perform and the money raised would be given to a local non-profit that provided arts training to children from under-resourced families. They reached out to a local performance theater that donated the space and got neighborhood bars and restaurants to sponsor the event. They sold tickets and packed the house out. The kids really enjoyed performing in front of their family, friends, and community.

Wow! We as a church staff would never have dreamed up that small-group idea. And there's a good chance that if we hadn't put some extra constraints on our leaders that semester, they wouldn't have either. We gave our leaders the freedom to be creative within some constraints, and we saw more creativity than we'd ever seen before

Clearly Communicate Your Vision

The more creative your small-group ministry is, the more clarity you need on your vision and structure. Let's say all of your groups are sermon-based discussion groups organized by gender. Your vision is something like, "Fostering community and discipleship by helping one another live out the weekend teaching." That vision is pretty self-evident. Almost any astute observer could look at what you are doing and distill your vision.

On the other hand, if your ministry is comprised of sermon-based groups, sports teams, Bible studies, moms' groups, and art collaboratives, the vision is a lot less obvious—unless your vision is just, "We want to get people together."

When I led a free-market small-group ministry that had all of these different types of groups, our vision statement was, "Make friends. Make disciples. Make a difference." Our vision was that groups would be a place that would foster real friendships, help people grow in Christlikeness, and impact the community. And since that vision wasn't self-evident just by looking at our groups, we repeated it over and over and over again. We put it on our literature. We said it at our leadership gatherings. I found ways to weave it into my conversations with our small-group directors. We wanted everyone in our ministry to be able to say our vision statement without even thinking.

Allow Failure

Most creative ideas fail. We come up with something we think is great, but for one reason or another it doesn't work. Creativity requires failure. If you try a bunch of new things, they're not all going to pan out.

If you want your leaders to be creative with their groups, take a hard look at the cost of failure in your system. The greater the cost of failure, the less likely that people will want to take risks.

If a small-group leader tries a new group idea and it doesn't work:

- How long is it before they can start a new group?
- Are they still welcomed into the community of leaders, or are they excluded because they're not currently leading?
- Will you celebrate them for trying something new, or put them in the "not leadership material" box?

In ministries that have a high cost of failure, the answers are something like:

- We launch groups once per year, and we'd love to have them try again then.
What the leader hears: It's going to be a long time before you can lead.
- We want to honor those who are actively serving, so only people who are currently leading are part of our leadership community.

What the leader hears: There's an in crowd, and you're not good enough to be in it.

- Our pastors focus solely on our high capacity leaders to best multiply their influence and tell their stories to inspire others.
What the leader hears: If you want respect and attention, you'd better get things right.

What leader would ever want to risk trying anything new at a church like that?

Here are the sort of answers we gave at National Community Church, a place where creativity is highly valued:

- New groups start three times per year, so you're never that far from trying again.
What the leader hears: You'll get another opportunity soon!
- If the group doesn't work out, you're considered an active leader for the remainder of that semester, just like all of the leaders whose groups succeeded, and you're invited to leaders-only activities.
What the leader hears: You're a valuable part of the team!
- Sometimes groups don't go the way we plan. Let me tell you a story from my own personal experience. We still want to walk with you through this.
What the leader hears: Sometimes groups don't work out—even for the pastor. You should try again!

We certainly need to invest in and tell stories about successful leaders. We want to give people an example to follow. We want to inspire them. As Andy Stanley says, "What's celebrated gets repeated." But we also have to remember that Jesus spent a lot of his time with the outcasts, society's losers, and the disenfranchised. And when we look at the earliest church leaders, the 12 disciples, we find one of the most spectacular failings in all of Scripture: Peter's denial of Jesus.

So while you may want to help your highest capacity leaders accomplish everything they can for the kingdom, you're also called to help position those whose potential may not be as immediately evident to accomplish everything that God has gifted them to do.

Even the most **Prime the Pump**

revolutionary figures drew inspiration from others. Picasso was influenced by Cézanne and Rousseau, and Bach was influenced by Buxtehude and Vivaldi. In penning the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson relied on the writings of John Locke and the Magna Carta.

How many of us have asked someone to lead a small group, telling them, "You can lead any kind of group you want," only to realize later that they don't have any idea what kind of group they want to lead?

A couple of years back we decided that during the summer we were going to encourage leaders to organize their groups around some kind of fun activity. We believe that we honor God when we enjoy the good gifts he has given us, and that fun activity groups can provide a place to invite people who don't yet know Jesus, giving them an opportunity to begin building relationships with others who do.

We wanted leaders to lead on the things they're interested in, but to prime the pump, we sent them this list of things that happen in the D.C. area:

Basketball	Groupon group
Crafting	Weight loss
Jazz in the Garden	Photography
Screen on the Green	Hockey
Swimming	Cookouts
Movie nights	Picnics
Book club	Game nights
Restaurant tour	Soccer
Baseball/softball	Gleaning (harvesting leftover crops)
Kickball	Golf
Kids' activities	Trapeze school
Dog owners	Drawing
Walking	Painting
Football	Classic cars
Cycling	Dancing
DC tourist tour	Sailing
Old Town Torpedo Factory art crawl	Gardening
Cooking	

While we didn't end up with any trapeze groups, we did have one that trained for a triathlon, another that toured local museums, and a third that golfed on Saturday mornings. In fact, of the 35 group ideas, we've had groups on at least 20 of them at some point or another.

I had one leader who was interested in leading, but was struggling to figure out what the group should do together. When he saw this list, he had an idea spark. Now he's leading a Monday night men's group that ends in time for Monday Night Football. They often watch the game together.

You'll notice we did two things: First we gave leaders a general direction, encouraging them to consider leading an activity group. Then later we gave them specific ideas on groups they could lead. You don't have to limit your leaders to a pre-selected list of curriculum, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't seed your leaders with ideas for their groups. Creativity is often the result of putting one's own stamp on another's idea.

Why Creativity Matters

You might be wondering why creativity in small groups is important. Why even care if groups are creative?

First, because God is the ultimate creator. His creativity is on display every time we look at the world around us or interact with the endless array of persons and personalities we encounter every day. No two are alike because God is a creative God who doesn't do things the same way over and over again. We were made in God's creative image, and one way we reflect his image and his glory into the world—one way that we bring him glory—is by being creative ourselves.

Second, in the words of Mark Batterson, "If we want to reach people no one else is reaching, we have to do things no one else is doing." In other words, there are people who might come to a Christ-centered art class for inner-city youth that aren't going to attend Wednesday night Bible study at the church building. And I've had leaders who probably wouldn't have signed up to lead a book study, but that doesn't mean they won't lead a group on creative writing or dancing.

Third, creativity is just plain interesting. Let's face it. After a while, meeting to study a book week after week, month after month, year after year can get a bit boring. Don't get me wrong. I place incredible value on faithfulness. But sometimes changing up the routine helps people remain faithful because they have something new to keep them excited and engaged.

Creative Ideas—Regardless of Model

Many of my examples are from a small-group ministry that has free-market groups, which is a model inherently designed to run off of creative ideas. But I recognize that model isn't best for all churches or contexts.

In fact, I believe the host model and the sermon-based model to be two of the most effective small-group systems out there. But you can foster creativity even within those models—it just takes a bit more creativity to do so.

Taking my own advice that you should prime the pump for creativity, here are a couple of things to consider if you have a more structured, content-driven group ministry:

Challenge your groups to find creative way not just to discuss the sermon, but to live it out as a group. Maybe for each series your church does, they do some kind of activity that drives home the key theme. I'm betting they'll remember a series on Jonah much better if they organize an outing on a boat. Or maybe Jesus' agrarian parables come to life when a group of city dwellers takes a trip to a working farm.

Perhaps your groups are based on geography. So let's say you challenge them to figure out creative ways to serve their communities. I've found that when groups or churches adopt a local school, they end up serving in ways they never would have imagined. Whatever your system or structure, consider how you might be able to foster creativity and innovation. You just might be surprised by the impact you have and the people you reach.

—Will Johnston is an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com and the former Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2016 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How effectively have you communicated your vision for small-group ministry? What parameters have you defined?
2. What is the cost of failure in your ministry? How might it be preventing creativity?
3. How might you prime the pump for creativity by offering a few ideas? What ideas might you offer?

Build a Small-Group Ministry Team

Figure out what you need and recruit the right people.

Will Johnston

“Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.” —Helen Keller

Without a team, your impact is limited to the number of leaders you can recruit and the number of groups you can support. With a team, there’s no ceiling on the ways God can use your small-group ministry.

If you want to have an effective team, the first thing you have to do is establish the team framework and draft the players. You need to define roles, figure out whether you’re going to hire staff or utilize volunteers, and then start recruiting.

Of course, reality is often not that linear. Frequently, we have the players—or some of the players—and have to figure out where they fit on the team. So while we’ll talk first about the framework and then about finding the players, there’s often a back and forth interplay between these stages.

Differentiation of Roles

There are a million ways to break down job responsibilities, and a larger church will have more division within each of these categories. Most churches I’ve seen, however, divvy up responsibilities in one of three ways (or use a hybrid of these methods).

By Expertise

Small-group ministry teams naturally start with this model. The person running the ministry brings people onto the team who can help with those tasks and responsibilities that he or she isn’t good at or doesn’t have time for. If someone’s a great writer, he writes curriculum. If another person is a good speaker, she teaches at the training events. If someone is great at pastoral care, he’s responsible for the leaders. There’s a natural shake-out of responsibilities. As the ministry grows, a decision is made (by intention or default) whether to stick with this model or move to another one. Most tasks in small-group ministry fall into three categories:

Content

Content is the informational side of group ministry, primarily consisting of curriculum and training. The person in charge of content needs to be an effective communicator and understand the dynamics of individual small groups.

Leader Engagement

This is, perhaps, the most critical component of any small-group ministry, no matter how it’s organized. As John Maxwell says, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” This person is responsible for investing relationally in leaders. He or she is also in charge of recruiting new

leaders—otherwise there won't be any leaders to invest in relationally. It's critical that this person is continually recruiting new leaders.

Assimilation and Logistics

Assimilation is the process of actually getting people into small groups, while logistics are all of the processes, procedures, and systems needed to help the small-group ministry run smoothly. These two responsibilities are pretty easily separated, but a lot of the skillsets overlap, so they're often lumped together. Marketing and organization are the primary skills required for this position.

By Geography or Campus

A second way of structuring a team is geographically. In this model, each team member is responsible for everything within a particular region or neighborhood.

One benefit of organizing the team geographically is that it's simply easier to connect with people who are close to you. Over time, you'll get to know the people who live around you much better simply because you have more opportunities to interact.

Another benefit is that the relational responsibilities are spread around. Even the most social, gregarious, outgoing people have a limit to the number of people they can meaningfully invest in.

The downside is that team members are no longer able to play to their strengths to the same degree. Rather than the most organized person being in charge of logistics, each team member shares in the logistical workload, even the ones who may not be good at logistics. And rather than the best writer and teacher doing the writing and teaching, those responsibilities are divvied up.

In a multi-site context, this model is especially effective. Depending on your church size and the number of groups, one person may be able to take the lead on leader engagement at two or even three campuses, but as the number of campuses and the distance between them increase, the ability of that individual to continue investing in those leaders becomes less and less. It's exponentially more difficult to care for 100 leaders spread across four campuses than it is to care for 100 leaders at one campus. Based on my experience, I would strongly recommend having a strong point person for groups at each location if you are multi-site.

By Category

You can also structure a team according to ministry type. You might have one person responsible for men's groups, another for women's groups, a third for couples' groups, a fourth for singles' groups, a fifth for seniors' groups, and so on.

Similar to the Expertise Model which allows leaders to be specialists in a particular skill set, the Categorical Model allows someone to be a specialist in a particular people group. Rather than a 20-something kid trying to figure out how to advise a group of octogenarians or the couple that got married at 21 attempting to understand the challenges of being single in your thirties, each

team member can become intimately familiar with the needs, challenges, and quirks of people in different life stages. This structure lends itself well to churches that offer a lot of group based on life stage.

But like the geography/campus model, you end up with folks operating outside of their primary giftings, which can be a strain.

Staff vs. Volunteer

We'd all love to be able to hire someone every time we have a responsibility that we don't have time to handle, but alas, that's not reality. So when should you utilize volunteers? And when should you bring someone onto the staff team?

My philosophy is to utilize volunteers as much as is practical. If I find a volunteer to do something rather than hiring a staff member, then I will. But if what is truly needed is someone who has the time and expertise that you're only going to find in a staff member, continuing to use volunteers will short-circuit your growth.

Here are three questions to ask yourself when trying to decide whether you need to add staff:

What are appropriate spans of care?

There's a limit to the number of people that any one leader can lead and care for effectively, and volunteers can care for fewer people than a staff member with dedicated time for ministry. When you and your volunteers begin to reach the limits of your span of care, you'll either need to change your system or bring on additional staff. Assuming each coach is caring for 10 leaders, I've found that a good rule of thumb is to hire an additional staff member once you hit 80–90 leaders.

Is it a good idea to change our system?

Some systems require a great deal more work to keep them running than others, so a system change may allow you to continue growing without adding additional staff members.

If you're coming up to a point where you're going to need additional help to continue doing things the way you're doing them, then you should take a hard look at whether it's time for a system change. Ask yourself questions like:

- Are groups accomplishing what we want them to?
- Are our leaders being effectively trained and cared for?
- Will this system continue to scale as we grow for the next 2–3 years?

If your answer to any of these is no, then it might be time to change your system. If your answer to all of them is yes, then you probably need to hire someone.

Also note that a system change could actually end up being more labor-intensive. For instance, if your leaders aren't being cared for because you don't have a good system to do that, then any system you implement as a fix will probably require more staff time, not less.

What type of work needs to be done?

In my experience, it's usually easier to find volunteers to do direct ministry than it is to find volunteers to do behind-the-scenes logistics and support. In other words, it's easier to recruit coaches than it is to find someone who will manage the database.

Most people would rather spend their time investing in people than coordinating details. Keeping track of numbers and processes is the sort of stuff that a lot of people do at work all day long, and they'd rather use their free time to invest relationally.

Plus, relationships tend to be a bit more flexible. If a volunteer coach is a week late in following up with leaders, it probably won't have a huge impact one way or the other. On the other hand, when a volunteer database administrator is late on processing the guests who inquired about groups so that someone can follow up with them, it will likely impact the effectiveness of connecting new people into groups.

Find Your Teammates

Whether you're looking for staff or volunteers, having the right people on the team is critical. A great team will accomplish a great deal. A sub-par team will not only fail, it will likely make everyone miserable in the process. Here are five things to look for in potential teammates.

They want it.

Some of my worst leadership experiences involve times when I've brought people on board who weren't excited about being on the team. People who want to be on the team go the extra mile. They do things without being asked. They're excited and they improve morale—including yours.

People who don't want to be on the team just check the boxes. They do the bare minimum. Not only will they drag you and your team down, they'll drag your leaders down as well.

When you talk with a potential teammate, watch for signs of excitement. Do they light up when you talk about what you want to accomplish and how they can contribute to that mission? Do they start coming up with ideas or asking great questions? If there aren't clear signs, it's okay to ask them how they feel about it. Make it clear that you don't want them to sign up just to fill a need or because they like you. You only want them to do it if they're passionate about what you're doing and ready to make time to do it.

They get it.

There are two critical things they have to understand. First, they have to be fully invested in your vision for groups. That doesn't mean they agree with every decision you make or every little thing

you do. But if they're constantly debating the overall direction of the ministry, then you'll end up spending a lot of energy just trying to keep your team on board with the vision—energy you could be using to invest in your leaders.

Second, they need to have an intuitive sense of what needs to be done. If you have to help them with every little decision or point out every little thing that needs to be done, they're probably not the right person for the job. They have to have a sense of ownership and empowerment to carry out their responsibilities.

You like them.

Frankly, if someone is going to serve on my team, I have to like them. Life is too short for me to pick team members that I don't like. And they have to be compatible with the other people already on the team.

I don't have to be best friends with everyone on every team I lead, but if we really don't get along, or if they mess with the overall team dynamic, productivity will suffer. It doesn't matter how good they are at what they do if the relational dynamics are off.

They know how to get things done.

For every job opening, whether staff or volunteer, I want to find someone whose skills fit the needs of the role. But I'm also looking for someone who knows how to get things done, regardless of what's in their job description.

It's inevitable that something is going to come up that isn't in anyone's portfolio or area of expertise. The lead pastor will make a request. The demographics of the church will change. Models and systems will shift. The best team members will figure out how to get things done in any circumstances.

Don't Settle

As you look for potential team members, I have a word of caution: Don't settle. One of the biggest mistakes you can make as you build your team is settling for someone you know isn't a good fit for the team.

Bad team members result in lower morale and lessened productivity. At first it may seem like just having someone there to do the work is worth it even if they're not the best person for the job, but you and others will end up frustrated eventually.

The ideal candidate isn't always available, though. When that happens, you need to consider four things:

- The ability of the rest of the team to cover until you find the right person
- The likelihood of finding the ideal candidate
- The decreased productivity resulting from not having the position filled
- The consequences of hiring a less-than-ideal candidate

If your whole team is running at the absolute limit of their capacity, the position that needs to be filled is mission critical, and there's a low likelihood that you'll find an ideal candidate in a reasonable amount of time, you're probably going to have to bring a less-than-ideal candidate on board.

On the other hand, if there are some folks on your team with a little bit of margin or you can slide by without the position being filled for a little while, then your best bet is to wait for the best candidate.

Developing a team is as easy—and difficult—as that. Define the roles for your team members and recruit the players. Just like that, you have a team.

—Will Johnston is an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com and the former Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2016 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Which model of differentiating roles would work best in your context?
2. What are the tasks or responsibilities you most need help with? Who might be able to help fill the gap?
3. What characteristics are you looking for in potential team members?

Develop Your Ministry Team

Coach your team to be effective and productive.

Will Johnston

Gathering a team around you is just the beginning. Now you have to coach that team, investing in individual team members and weaving them together into a cohesive unit.

The most important outcome of developing team members is communicating that you value who they are, not just what they do. This makes our teams more attractive places to be, and that makes recruiting and retaining leaders a lot easier. On the practical side, investing in our people helps them to be better at what they do, and that makes them more productive.

Team member development happens in three primary areas. The first area is personal and spiritual development. This does two things. First, it lets people know we care about them for more than just their work product. Second, it models the type of relationships that we want to foster in groups. If we're not helping the people closest to us grow in Christlikeness, then our call for small groups to be places where discipleship or spiritual growth happens rings hollow. Without us modeling this value, group leaders won't take the time and effort to invest in their group members.

The second area is professional development related to the person's role on the team. If you've got recruiters, you want to help them become better recruiters. If you have people who write curriculum, you want to help them become better writers. The better each team member is at his or her job, the better the team will be.

The third area is professional development not related to the person's role on the team. For instance, you may have someone recruiting leaders who has a desire to preach or someone writing curriculum who wants to do pastoral counseling. It's important to provide opportunities that help them develop these skills.

This type of development doesn't provide an immediate payoff for the team. After all, helping your recruiters become better writers doesn't make them better recruiters. But in the long term it makes a big difference. When we develop people in ways that aren't immediately beneficial to us, we communicate that we value them as people, not just for the role they play, and that's critically important.

It also strengthens your team as a whole. First of all, your team will be prepared for whatever comes its way. If you lose a staff member, have to restructure your team, or get assigned a new project, those seemingly tangential skills you've been helping your team develop may suddenly become critically important. Second, when word gets around that your team is a place where people grow and thrive, others will want to be a part of that.

Develop Team Members

So how do you develop people on your team? Here are three key ways:

Provide Resources

Take (or send) them to conferences, give them books, and provide a coach. Make sure that the people on your team have all of the resources they need to grow, and then allow them the time to pursue them. Let them read during work hours. Give them time off above and beyond their vacation time to go to conferences. Let them know that you want to invest in them.

Create Opportunities

If they want to grow as a speaker, get them stage time at your next church event. If they want to write, use your contacts to help them land an opportunity. Get them opportunities that they couldn't get for themselves, and then give them constructive feedback on how they can continue to improve.

Bring Them Along

You've probably heard that more is caught than taught. So much of discipleship, mentoring, and growth happens not in meetings but in the day to day of life. As much as you can, bring your team along with you as you minister and live life. Take them to meetings. Let them watch as you study and preach. Have them over for dinner so they can see how you interact with your spouse or kids or roommates. They'll pick up amazing things simply by watching what you do and how you do it.

I will warn you that team member development requires a great deal of maturity on your part. If you develop your team members, their skills and abilities may begin to outpace yours, or they may leave to pursue other opportunities. Good leaders are excited when the people on their team surpass them, but being truly excited requires both humility and maturity.

Develop the Team

You're not just responsible for developing individual team members. You're also responsible for developing them together as a team. Here are three key ways to do that:

Shared Experiences

Consider what you can do together as a team: go to a conference, read and discuss a book, listen to podcasts, or watch videos. Some shared experiences will build skills, but it's also a good idea to consider experiences that will simply let the team bond—like a fun trip or retreat.

Facilitate Healthy Interactions

Sometimes team members don't see eye-to-eye, so they'll need guidance on interacting in healthy and helpful ways. As the leader, you're responsible for making sure team

members are communicating well and disagreements are being resolved in a healthy manner.

When I served under Heather Zempel, Discipleship Pastor at National Community Church in Washington, D.C., she came up with four rules of engagement for our team: Positivity, Honesty and Honor, Differentiating Debate and Decision, and Teamwork. These rules helped us work together in a way that allowed us to both accomplish our goals and continue liking each other.

Meetings

Meetings should happen as often as necessary for collaboration and relationship-building—no more, and no less. Extra meetings or meetings where nothing gets accomplished drive people crazy, but it's essential that teams get together to make sure team members get to know one another and are all on the same page. You'll also need to consider your context. Will your meetings include staff, volunteers, or a mix? Does everyone live close by, or will some need to travel?

When I was at NCC, my team was a mix of staff and volunteers, and being a multi-site church, we were pretty spread out geographically—some people lived 90 minutes apart. It was pretty tough to figure out how often to meet, and it took a long time to figure out the right rhythm. But once we did, it was like gold. Your needs and community will vary, but our rhythm may help you figure out your own.

We did about ten in-person meetings per year, essentially meeting monthly but taking a couple of our busier months off. With such varied schedules and geography, I didn't feel like we could meet more often than that. But we weren't really able to get everything done that we needed to during those meetings.

So we instituted a weekly 15-minute conference call. We did it at 7:30 a.m. on Thursdays. This was a game changer. We suddenly had a weekly touch point where I could keep the team up to speed with what was going on, and it gave them a forum to ask questions or discuss ideas.

Here's what these meetings did:

- Gave us an opportunity to discuss what was happening in our ministry on a regular basis.
- Gave me an opportunity to keep them in the loop with the developments that were shared among the church staff, increasing both their buy-in and their effectiveness.
- Provided a reminder to our volunteer team members to be working on groups. (They actually told me that the fact that the call was coming up or had happened got them thinking about what they needed to be working on.)
- Created a regular time when they knew they could ask questions.
- Built a sense of team among people who weren't together all that often.

That last point bears further discussion. As the point people at each of our campuses, the people on my team functioned pretty independently. They weren't really reliant on one another to do their jobs. But being part of a team gave people the sense that we were all in this together, and that's key to engagement and longevity.

It was easy for me to forget that my team didn't know each other all that well. We'd get together for our monthly meeting, and I'd dive right in, only to have one of them stop me and ask if we could go around the room and introduce ourselves because there were people they either hadn't met or had only met once or twice before. I knew all of them because I recruited them, trained them, and met with them individually. But our infrequent meetings meant that some team members had little to no chance of getting to know each other. Our weekly phone calls took us from being a bunch of people doing the same job to being a true team.

If you want a team that can make a big impact for the kingdom, then help your team members become the best they can be. Help them figure out how to work together, put the team above self, and truly enjoy working with one another.

—Will Johnston is an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com and the former Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2016 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How might you intentionally develop the individuals on your team? What do they need from you?
2. How can you encourage your team to operate as a cohesive unit?
3. What's the right number of meetings for your team? Are you currently meeting too much or too little?

Set Your Small-Group Ministry Calendar

Expert tips for creating a calendar that works for your church

Will Johnston

“Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that's the stuff life is made of.” — Benjamin Franklin

Get your small-group ministry calendar right, and you'll accomplish more with less effort. Trying to force a rhythm that doesn't fit the culture of your church or community is like trying to cram the proverbial square peg into a round hole.

Consider these questions when planning your small-group ministry calendar:

Community Rhythms

What is the rhythm of life in your community?

Every community has a rhythm, and small groups should leverage that rhythm. Trying to launch small groups at the beginning of harvest season in Iowa or having coaching huddles on Friday nights during football season in west Texas won't be very successful.

Is our community transient or stable?

Washington, D.C., is an incredibly transient place. When I served at National Community Church, we ran 8- to 14-week small groups that were always open to new people joining. If NCC had long-term closed groups, as some great small-group ministries do, we would have had groups that fell apart halfway through as people transitioned, and we wouldn't have had anywhere to put new people who joined the church at various times of the year.

If you're in a highly mobile area, don't develop your calendar assuming that people will be around for years and years. By the same token, if your community has a more stable population, consider that when planning your calendar.

Groups in areas with transient populations tend to require more entry and exit points. Not only are people coming and going frequently, but also there's a greater need to get connected quickly. In more stable areas, it's possible to have longer-term groups that place a greater emphasis on depth of community.

When are the busy and slow seasons of the dominate industries in our area?

For obvious reasons, it's probably best not to launch groups or hold training events when people are at their busiest. No one wants anything extra on their calendar when they're already slammed. On the flip side, especially slow seasons can also be a difficult time to schedule these things, as folks are often taking advantage of the opportunity to travel. NCC, for instance, is mindful of the rhythms of government as many people in the congregation work on Capitol Hill.

What recreational activities are popular?

If your entire community attends football games on Friday nights, don't schedule important events during that time. On the other hand, you could start groups for parents that meet on the bleachers during practice. Leveraging natural gathering times means you don't have to ask people to put one more thing on their calendars. You can just help them make better use of time they've already committed.

Sometimes in ministry we like to think, "Well, if they were truly committed, they would come anyway." Maybe that's true, but if you live in Minnesota, I'm not sure there's anything God-honoring about trying to drag people inside for an intensive Bible study on Saturday afternoons during the four months of the year when it's warm enough to be outside.

What stage of life are most people in?

Do you have a lot of college students and young families? If so, then the school calendar probably drives a lot of the rhythm of life in your community, meaning people will probably be traveling over the summer and during the holidays.

My friend Steve Curran, small-group pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Georgia, talks about the three *after* seasons in ministry: *after* the new year, *after* Easter, and *after* school starts. If you're in an area with a lot of families, that's a rhythm you might want to consider. NCC, on the other hand, is on a hybrid of the collegiate calendar and political calendar, so they launch groups in February, June, and September.

If you live in a community full of childless professionals or empty nesters, your rhythm may need to be totally different. I've found that churches, especially evangelical churches, tend to cater to young families. And while that's a good idea in the Chicago suburbs where I grew up, it's a missed opportunity in a young metropolis like Washington, D.C., or an expansive retirement community like The Villages in Florida.

What are the rhythms in your church?

Many of the rhythms of your church and your community likely parallel each other, but there are also rhythms that are unique to your congregation. My friend Edgar Rivas works at Chicago Tabernacle, where Tuesday night prayer is the most important meeting of the week. They also put on an Easter production called "Story of Love" that reaches thousands of people and requires thousands of hours to prepare and run. Their small-group system has to take those weekly and yearly rhythms into account.

So, for instance, if summer picnics and potlucks are a key part of your church's culture, you might not run groups over the summer but rather utilize those existing events as connection opportunities. Likewise, if your church generally shuts down over the summer, it wouldn't be wise to hold important events during that time.

Don't fight your church's rhythms in an effort to find the "ideal" small-group rhythm. Certainly, if those rhythms are unhealthy or unhelpful, then by all means advocate to change them, but if

that's not the case, then it's probably not worth the expenditure of time, energy, and relational capital to make changes to things that are an ingrained part of your church's culture.

What other things are on the calendar?

When scheduling small-group events and campaigns, you'll want to consider how other church events will impact what you're trying to do. You might even need to consider what needs to go so that they aren't competing with small groups. What events does your church already have scheduled on the calendar? Perhaps it's a men's event, a women's event, an outreach, an annual retreat, or a community event that happens regularly. Some of these things probably can and should be done away with. Others are genuinely important or have a strong constituency that won't want them axed. And some events might need to be modified to have a positive impact on group life. Here are three questions to consider your church's events so they don't interfere with small groups:

Can they be moved?

When I was at NCC, for some reason there was this idea that ministry team recruitment needed to be scheduled at exactly the same time as small-group promotion. This meant that neither small groups nor ministry teams got the devoted promotion time they needed. It didn't make a ton of sense.

Small groups at NCC run on a semester schedule, so they are promoted at the beginning of each semester. Those semesters were set by holidays, Congressional recess, and other community rhythms, so there isn't a lot of wiggle room for promoting groups. Ministry teams, on the other hand, run all year, so promotion could happen at various times. Eventually, we were able to get the timing of ministry recruitment adjusted so that it didn't happen in the middle of small-group promotion, resulting in both ministries getting the attention they needed.

Can they be leveraged?

At NCC, we scheduled our men's events just before we launched new groups so that those events could serve as another place to connect guys and move them into small groups. Plus, this moved men's events to times when small groups were taking a break, which meant more people could attend the events. We also built the message of the events around the idea of discipleship and launched groups with the same branding as the events to further underscore that the event was a catalyst for community. Consider how events at your church might serve as a catalyst for small groups.

How much are we asking of our leaders?

Consider the general busyness of the season before adding something to the calendar. If you're doing an all-church outreach the first weekend of the month and a baptism service the second weekend, you shouldn't schedule a mandatory small-group leader training event for the third weekend. You'll burn people out if you don't give them a break.

When are we going to communicate about events?

You'll also need to schedule in when you'll be talking to the congregation about the events you're scheduling. For instance, you'll want to clear the schedule for the first week of small groups, but you'll also want to clear the calendar for a few weeks before so you can effectively communicate about your small-group launch.

That means if you have an event coming up, like the launch of groups, you won't want to schedule other key events around the same time. Otherwise neither event will get the promotion time it deserves. The men's events I mentioned earlier, for instance, happened a couple of weeks before small groups launched. This allowed us to promote the men's event first and hold the event before it was time to promote small groups. This ensured that both got adequate promotion time.

Pro Tip: Get a Real Calendar

A few years ago I found myself with lower than normal attendance at one of our leadership events, and it was due to my failure to effectively communicate that it was happening. It was a recurring event, happening every semester. I had just forgotten to send announcements and reminders to our leaders. So I got three-foot by six-foot NeuYear Giant Calendar that I hung on the wall and used to plan out my whole year.

I put every major deadline, leadership event, and group launch on it, and I added key church events like our baptism and Easter services as well. Then I worked backward and plotted when I needed to communicate each event to leaders. I added my travel so that I could easily see if something needed to be handled before I left or delayed while I was gone. I could easily see if I needed to I could make adjustments if a season was too crowded.

This allowed me to see what was coming up and what needed to be done, all at a glance. I found this to be invaluable for organizing and planning the small-group ministry schedule, and as time progressed, it became quite a useful tool for other members of the team to keep track of both what was going on in the ministry as well as when I would be out of the office.

Having all of the big, important items visible in one place helps the brain evaluate them in a way that is difficult to replicate on Google Calendar, Outlook, or iCal. When you're trying to plan your year, a big wall calendar is the right tool for the job.

—Will Johnston is an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com and the former Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2016 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What are the natural rhythms of your church and community?
2. What events tend to compete with small groups—whether church or community events? How might you schedule things differently to avoid conflict?
3. What, if anything, needs to go to keep the focus on small groups?

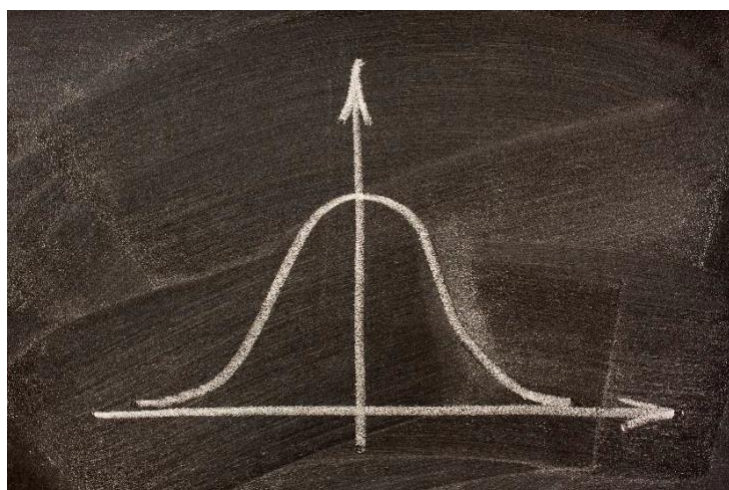
Make Changes Before You Think It's Time

Real leaders make proactive change to prepare for the future.

Will Johnston

Want your ministry to have the greatest impact it possibly can? Then you have to be willing to change things that are wildly successful.

The concept is called "jumping the curve." By making changes in the midst of success, you avoid the inevitable plateau and decline that every system, method, and model will eventually experience. Unfortunately, most leaders start something new, let it grow, enjoy the growth without making any changes, and then watch the ministry slowly decline. Eventually, ministries like this will simply die. It's the picture of a classic "bell curve."



A Precautionary Tale

Kodak was founded by George Eastman, an incredible visionary and inventor. It's almost impossible to overstate his impact on the world of photography. In the late 1800s, cameras were big and clunky. They were functionally impractical and financially out of reach for the average person. That is, until Eastman invented both film rolls and the handheld camera. That

spirit of innovation lasted for nearly a century. Kodak was responsible for advance after advance in both still and motion photography.

In 1975 Steven Sasson, a Kodak employee, invented the digital camera, but Kodak didn't pursue the technology aggressively because they had the market cornered on film. They did, however, allow Mr. Sasson to continue working on digital imaging, and in 1989, he and Robert Hills developed the first modern digital SLR camera, the type of camera used by nearly every professional photographer today. This time, the project was shelved completely because it would cannibalize film sales, and film was wildly successful. In 1996, Kodak was worth \$31 billion.

But in 2007, things took a turn. Kodak's patent on digital SLR cameras—on which it earned licensing fees from the companies manufacturing them—expired. And in 2011, Kodak filed bankruptcy amid a near total collapse of its business. It only took 15 years for a company that was over a century old to go from \$31 billion to bankruptcy.

Fortunately, we don't all lead quite that poorly. Most of us attempt to make some changes when things begin to take a turn. Once things start to go wrong, we notice, and we make

a change. It may take some time to see the benefits of that change, but before long things have turned around.

The Right Time to Change

This happened in my ministry a few years ago. I was serving on the groups team at a multi-site church, and I led our team of volunteer small-group coordinators. Each of our nine services (spread across six campuses) had a dedicated small-group coordinator.

The coordinator was responsible for promoting groups to the congregation and had limited responsibilities with the leaders. Meanwhile, I was the person primarily responsible for logistics, communication, and handling any pastoral needs that arose.

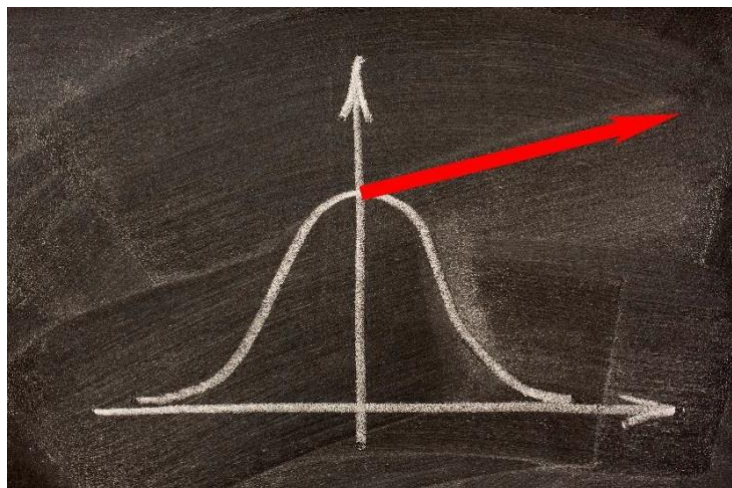
It wasn't working very well. I couldn't effectively pastor the leaders of 100+ groups spread out across that many campuses, so if something went wrong with a leader or in a group, I became the guy who was swooping in from the outside telling them how to fix the problem rather than a pastor walking alongside them, shepherding them.

The problems were the result of a confluence of factors: my ineffectiveness at leading the small-group coordinator team, the addition of two new campuses, a lack of responsibility on the part of staff from another team, and some other internal issues.

Things weren't terrible, but they weren't thriving either. Our group numbers were still growing, and our groups were doing some great things, but we weren't able to care for and invest in our leaders to the degree that we wanted or needed.

So we made a change. We gave our small-group coordinators additional pastoral and communication responsibilities and changed their title to small-group director to reflect their change in role. At some of our campuses, the role of director even became a staff position. And I upped my leadership game.

We eventually restructured our whole small-group ministry team around this small-group director model, and I think that model or some variation thereof will serve well for the



next few years. I'm pretty proud of what we accomplished and where the ministry is headed, but I regret not changing sooner.

The best leaders start making changes before things start turning downward. They look ahead to see what will be needed in the near future, and they make changes while things are still going well to prepare for an even greater future. These leaders

don't wait for a decline or even a plateau in productivity. They make a shift in the midst of success—they jump the curve. This is, perhaps, the hardest type of change to make.

Making Change Too Late

Let's say you've launched a small-group ministry at a church of around 1,200 people. You started with 15 groups, and in 6 months doubled to 30. You know that you can effectively coach only about 50 leaders, so before your next launch you raise up three coaches to help share the load.

Suddenly, you're just a bit less accessible to your leaders than you were before. You've not only asked some leaders to contact their coaches before coming to you, you now have more administrative responsibilities as you run a system. Plus, you're spending a large amount of time investing in those three coaches, and you're focused on identifying three more.

You had been expecting the number of groups to double again at your next launch, but things fell a bit short of expectations. You only hit 50 groups instead of the 60 you had been wanting. A few leaders dropped out because they were frustrated with being coached by someone else, and a few of the leaders you were coaching dropped out because you didn't have the time for them that you had previously.

Despite the setback, you keep plugging away, coaching your leaders, building systems, recruiting leaders, and looking for new coaches.

By the time you're ready for your fourth launch, you've got 6 coaches in place, each taking on 12 leaders. That's good, because you now have 100 groups lined up and need all the help you can get.

Are you beginning to see the impact of being a leader who jumps the curve?

Proactive Change

What would have happened if you hadn't raised up those coaches? You'd have hit your 60 groups on your third launch, but you wouldn't have been able to effectively care for them.

If you'd waited to raise up coaches at that point, it would be too late for some of your leaders. They wouldn't be getting the care they wanted, and you'd lose them. Plus, you'd have less capacity to care for leaders as you try to invest in a coaching system, so you'd have to take on less, which means you would have to launch less groups. Because you didn't jump the curve, you'd be struggling by your third launch, and who knows what you'd have for your fourth launch.

No one wants to make a change when things are thriving. You've probably heard the axiom: If it ain't broke, don't fix it. While people are always resistant to change, they're especially resistant when there's no felt need for change.

But that's where we as leaders come in. We need to look not only at where we are now and how things are going, but also into the future. We need to see what's coming next and make proactive changes that will result in continued growth. We need to have the courage to jump the curve.

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Discuss

1. Do you tend to make change too early or too late? Why?
2. What might your ministry need in the next 6-12 months?
3. How might you prepare now for those future needs?

Time to Make a Change

Change is hard, but choosing the right timing can make it go much smoother.

Will Johnston

During my time at National Community Church, we decided to move our new small-group leader training online. As we planted more campuses, the church had grown both in numbers and geography, and live training events for new leaders were becoming quite cumbersome both for staff and new leaders.

In order to deliver that online training, we signed up to beta test a new piece of training software that was about to be released. Understandably, it had a few issues. That's why beta testing exists: to help work out the kinks before releasing a product to the public. The company always fixed the kinks, but it seemed that every time they did, new issues would pop up, often at a critical time for our ministry.

We began debating whether we needed to find a different system, but we always ended up deciding to stay with the current one. We had a relationship with the folks building the software, and it had a lot of promise. If it worked the way it was supposed to, it was exactly the system we needed.

We were caught in the tension between finding a new system that probably wouldn't work quite how we wanted it to and sticking with the current one that had the potential to become what we were looking for.

This went on for years, and eventually we had to jump ship. Looking back, I'm sorry we didn't make the change sooner. The problems were significant enough that some folks chose not to lead because they were frustrated with the training.

As our ministries grow and change, we must learn to change along with them. Otherwise, we'll plateau or even decline. The trouble is knowing when to make those changes. Change is almost always difficult, but the right timing gives us the best possibility of success. You don't want to make the mistake we did of waiting too long to make a change, but it's also possible to change too soon—and that's equally harmful.

Types of Timing

There are three types of timing to consider when you're making a change:

Calendar Timing

If you change things too often, you'll give your congregation and leaders ministry whiplash. Decide to implement sermon-based groups and huddle-based coaching only to stop writing the curriculum six months later in favor of "letting your leaders pursue groups they're passionate about," followed to a switch to one-on-one coaching to "better meet

the needs of each individual leader" three months after that? Your leaders will disengage. Why would they invest in something that won't be around in a few months?

I've found two years to be a good rule of thumb for making major changes. If you've implemented a new system, give it at least two years before trashing it in favor of something else. Of course, that doesn't mean that you don't make incremental changes as you go. You always want to be tweaking and tuning things to make them better.

You also want to be aware of the season your church is in. If summer is your slowest time for small groups, you might not want to implement a change when a lot of your leaders won't actively engage with what's going on. On the other hand, it may be the perfect time to make a change so that you can fine-tune it on a smaller number of groups before your big push in the fall.

Let's say your lead pastor has just planned a huge initiative to launch a second site for your church in six months. You may want to hold off on moving from semester-based groups to year-long groups until after that initiative. Your congregation will already be on communication overload.

Ministry Timing

Often the current status of the ministry will necessitate a change, specifically as you're growing. Most coaching systems will be healthy somewhere in a range. The initial system you build may be good for 10-30 groups. Your next one may work for 20-80, the one after that could effectively support 40-120, and the one after that 80-200.

Remember, you want to jump the curve, so if you have 10-30 groups, you'll want to know where you're headed next and start making that change at 20-25 groups so that your growth is never limited by an inadequate system. And if that next system is good for 20-80 groups, you'll want to start thinking through what's next when you're in the 40-45 groups range and then actually make that jump when you're somewhere between 60-80 groups.

The same is true if you're considering a system that will best engage your congregation. Maybe you implemented Bible study groups at a smaller church where most attenders had been around awhile. Now, though, the church is starting to grow and you realize you need to move to campaigns to most effectively get newcomers involved. As our ministries and churches shift and change, it's time to make a change to our structure. You never want to top a system out and let an inadequate system be the reason your ministry can't grow.

"Oops, I Screwed Up" Timing

Sometimes the best-laid plans don't work out. That coaching system that sounded great on paper in your discussions? Well, it was only great in theory. In those cases, a change is forced by the realities of the situation. The current system is untenable and you have to figure out how to fix it or scrap it.

Timing Tension

If only all of our decisions on when to make a change fell neatly into one of those three categories. Unfortunately, they're often influenced by more than one of them.

You might experience rapid growth that necessitates a change in your coaching structure six months after you implemented it. Ministry timing and calendar timing are in tension.

Or perhaps you threw all of your political and relational capital behind small-group campaigns and they're just not working, but it's only been nine months, and you feel like you need to do something else. "Oops, I screwed up" timing is in tension with calendar timing.

Maybe you've outgrown your coaching system, but your church is about to undertake a huge building campaign. Ministry timing and calendar timing are in tension.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself when you find yourself with timing tension:

How bad is it?

How bad is the situation you're in, really? When you say small-group campaigns just aren't working, do you mean that you've dropped from 50 percent involvement in small groups to 25 percent, or did you just stay steady at 50 percent and not hit the 80 percent that you used to sell campaigns to your lead pastor?

It's possible that it might not be all that bad and it's best just to let it limp along until you can make a change without making people feel like everything is changing too often.

Can it be fixed?

Take the time to really evaluate what's going on. Are there small or gradual changes that can be implemented to make things work better? Maybe campaigns aren't going as well as you'd like because you don't have the sermon topics in time to write a good curriculum. Perhaps you've failed to vision cast the benefit of starting a group with each campaign to the congregation. You might be able to fix a few problems and still get where you're trying to go.

How is it perceived?

Almost as important as the reality of the situation is how it feels to the people involved. Maybe the result of implementing campaigns has really been very little. You're basically just right where you started. But it may be that your lead pastor isn't happy with the lack of increased participation or your leaders are frustrated that small groups aren't getting the additional attention from the stage that you promised when you were vision casting. Even if you're able to fix something, you'll be fighting a losing battle if everyone has already checked out.

Is it better to limp along, make a change, or scrap it?

Assuming it really is bad, it can't be fixed, and/or you've lost the battle for hearts and minds, what's the best solution? Do you let things limp along until enough time has passed and you can implement a better system? Do you try to make a change now? Or do you just kill it and start over again in the future?

There's obviously no one-size-fits-all answer. Sometimes you just need to stick with what you've got. You may need to give it time to gain traction and keep tweaking until the results are at least passable. Sometimes things are so bad that you just have to try something new, even if the time or circumstances aren't ideal. And occasionally you may just need to kill it and try again at a more opportune time.

Whatever change you're considering—whether you're looking to take a thriving ministry to the next level or just trying keep things from totally exploding—consider your circumstances and figure out the best possible time to implement those changes.

—Will Johnston is an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com and the former Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2016 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What factors are telling you it's time to change your model, system, or structure?
2. What might be the best time to make that change as you look at your church calendar?
3. What other factors do you need to consider as you time this change?

Further Exploration

Resources to help you effectively lead your ministry.

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

- [Become a Church of Groups](#)
- [Connecting Newcomers](#)
- [Create a Compelling Vision](#)
- [Develop a Group Strategy](#)
- [Market Your Small Group Ministry](#)
- [Recruit Great Coaches](#)
- [Small-Group Director Orientation Guide](#)

Building a Life-Changing Small Group Ministry

Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson
Zondervan, 2012

Establish, develop, and grow a thriving small-group ministry in your church.

Community Is Messy: The Perils and Promise of Small Group Ministry

Heather Zempel
IVP, 2012

Learn to create a model for creative, dynamic, deep small-group ministry.

Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture

Andy Stanley and Bill Willits
Multnomah, 2004

The authors describe how they established a small-group culture at North Point Community Church.