



Develop a Group Strategy

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How to Use This Resource

According to recent research from LifeWay, less than 50 percent of church leaders say their churches have a well-defined approach to small-group ministry. Yikes! Without a clear plan, it's unlikely that small groups will produce the results we desire. This resource is designed to help you develop a strategy for your context, customizing your plan to fit your goals.

Before You Begin

I know you're eager to jump in, but start with these articles first. You'll get a realistic picture of your ministry with "Start Where You Are." Then Rick Howerton will help you create a vision statement for your ministry. Once that's set, you can move on to the rest of the resource.

Choose a Model

These articles will help you decide how to structure your groups. Rather than simply choose the one you've read the book on, use these articles to determine which one will best fit in your context.

Build Your Strategy

With your group model chosen, put together the rest of the pieces for your strategy. How will you train leaders? How will you coach them? How will you keep everything running smoothly? These articles will help you make a plan. Lastly, "7 Signs You Have a Bad Ministry Design" will point out common issues in group structures. Check your plan against the warning signs.

—Amy Jackson is Managing Editor of *SmallGroups.com*.

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Start Where You Are

Before you make a plan, gain a clear picture of your current reality.

M. Scott Boren

You want the experience of community—the kind that is infectious, life-giving, and offers hope to the world. We are made for relationships. It's part of God's design. But how do you form a ministry of groups that offers community like that? Where do you start the journey to groups that live out community and mission?

No matter the journey, the best way to get there is to start from where you are. While this sounds incredibly obvious, I've found that this is probably the most overlooked step in the process of leading a church into group life.

Missing Reality

In my experience, most churches focus on their vision for ministry—what they want to accomplish. And while that's good to keep in mind, churches first need an accurate view of their strengths and weaknesses, the life patterns of the people in the church, and the context in which the church is set.

Most churches struggling with small groups think the problem is about the way they're doing groups. But the problem is usually that they've failed to implement group strategies that take into account their context.

Groups are about people. As soon as we think that the issue is structural in nature, that a strategy will fix the group problem, we undermine that which makes groups work in the first place: relationships. In order for a church's relationships to work differently, we have to understand the way the relationships work *now*. We can't lead people to a new place if we don't understand where they are currently.

For instance, if a church has been shaped by decades of programmatic church life that requires clergy direction, fixed events, and printed curriculum, it doesn't matter how much you talk about relationships and community. Those old church patterns are part of the unspoken way that church works. If the leadership does not understand this fact, they can't lead the church into a new way of relating.

Or consider a church where most people say they're committed to live in community with one another and reach their community with the gospel, but the reality is that people just want things to return to the way the church did things in the 1970s. And they want the pastor to fix it. Bringing in a new strategy might brighten things up for a short while, but it won't result in great small groups.

Exegesis

When preachers attend seminary, they take classes on biblical exegesis, a technical term that simply means deep understanding or critical interpretation. When we preach or teach Bible classes, we aim to do so with a sound knowledge of what the Bible means. We start from where the Bible is coming from, and then move those truths into our lives.

In a similar way, we need to do exegetical work to understand our starting point. We need to become aware of our reality. Only then can we develop an understanding of what is going on and what it will take to move forward. We must develop a deep understanding of three domains:

1. The church
2. The life of the people in the church
3. The local context

Exegesis of the Church

When I work with a church, one of the first things I do is listen. Through a series of interviews and surveys, I gather their stories. I want to hear where they've been, what led them to this point in the journey, and how they feel about it. How can we understand where God is leading a church if we don't understand how God *has been* leading it? How can we see where we might be off right now, if we don't understand how we have been off in the past?

One of the hardest things for church leaders to do is have an accurate view of their own journey. I find that they either think they are far ahead of reality or they think they're much worse off than reality. This is the reason you need to ask questions about the church that you would not normally ask. For instance:

- What are the highs and lows of the church's life?
- Where have the main transitions occurred?
- What are the unique strengths?
- What are the weaknesses?
- What has occurred within the last three years that we should celebrate?
- What has occurred within the last three years that we should mourn?
- Where are the places that people are expressing a sense of urgency?
- Where are the places that people are stuck in complacency?

From a strategic point of view, the last two questions are especially crucial. Without a sense of urgency, at least within a pocket of people, it's hard to move a church into a new reality. People don't change because you have a great new idea. Change is an emotional issue and people refuse to change not because they don't want your new idea, but because they don't want to give up what they have. Therefore, exegeting the church is a way to help people develop a sense of urgency about what God is already doing and what God wants to do in your church. (Note: It's often helpful to get someone from the outside to help you see this reality accurately. As leaders of the church, we have blindspots, and others can help us gain a more accurate picture.)

Exegesis of the Life of the People in the Church

The deep understanding that comes as a result of this work is not directly about how church people relate to the church vision or programming. Nor is it about moral issues. This is about understanding how people do life in your context. Questions here might include:

- What is the standard of living? Blue collar? White Collar?
- What is the ethnic makeup?
- What is the average commute to work?
- Describe work patterns of individuals.
- How do people spend their free time?
- Describe the involvement of kids in extracurricular activities?
- Where do people live in relationship to the church building? How has this changed in the last two decades?
- Identify how people relate to others, describing things like established friendships vs. transitory connections, and consistent contact vs. limited interaction.
- Outline the nature of the relationships and connectivity within the membership of the church, asking questions like: To what degree are friendships dependent upon church programming? To what level do people feel connected to others in the church?

Exegesis of the Context

Awareness of what's going on in the local context is something missionaries have done for generations, but it's not something that comes to mind when we think of developing groups in our own context. But it's crucial for two reasons. First, the church is called to be salt and light in our local context, and that requires that we understand our context. Second, it's helpful to understand how the relationship patterns of those within the church compare to the relationship patterns of those outside the church.

Questions to exegete the context might include:

- How has the neighborhood changed in the past decade?
- How does the neighborhood perceive the local church?
- What are the opportunities that we have as a result of what's going on in our context?
- What are the challenges that we face in this context?

After reading this, you might be wondering where the action is. Pastors are, after all, held accountable for what kinds of ministry they produce. And if your job is to get groups started or to take groups to the next level, you feel the pressure to do something to make that happen.

While you may be eager to jump in and get stuff done, I would argue that we've gone down that road for far too long. Without understanding our starting point, we set ourselves up for failure when we try to implement a plan. Do the work of understanding your context up front, or you'll have to do it later.

—M. Scott Boren is the author of several books including *Leading Small Groups in the Way of Jesus*; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Take an honest look at your church and answer the exegesis questions in the article. What new insights have you gained?
2. Who on your team can you discuss these insights with? What other church leaders need to know these insights?
3. How do those insights affect your plans for the small-group ministry?

The Power of Vision

Articulate a clear vision for your ministry and see the amazing results.

Rick Howerton

John Maxwell once said, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” While this may be a bit of an overstatement, one thing is for sure: an effective leader is necessary if anything of substance is going to be accomplished. But what drives an effective leader? What keeps a leader in the game when things get tough? What inspires a leader to give his or her life to a particular goal? *Vision* is what makes a leader great. In fact, visionless leaders aren’t leaders at all—they’re managers.

Managers supervise an efficient workforce through which the necessary work is completed in a timely and effective fashion. They make sure tasks are accomplished. Leaders, on the other hand, have the ability to obtain and retain followers by organizing, unifying, and directing them to accomplish a God-given vision.

Small-group ministry is full of point people who are managers. What today’s church needs is small-group point people who are leaders, people who have a vision in mind and will organize and inspire people to join them in seeing that yet unrealized vision become a present reality. Effective leaders have a vision in their hearts that is inescapable.

But what exactly is vision? Vision is a mental image of the final outcome, a preferred future you long to see and believe will become a reality. Throughout history God has given people visions that guided their work and brought their hearts to life. Moses was given a vision by God and led God’s people out of Egypt. Nehemiah had a vision to rebuild the Jerusalem wall. The apostles had a vision to build Jesus’ church. Great and God-sized goals are determined and accomplished when leaders embrace a God-given vision.

The Results of Vision

How might having a clear, compelling, and God-sized vision affect your ministry? There are four amazing outcomes:

Find the Right Leaders

Vision is the most important tool you have for recruiting team members, coaches, and group leaders. Too many church leaders ask people to join their team because there’s a need. People who step up do so out of benevolence, not necessarily because they believe in the small-group ministry. They’ll lack passion for the goals of the ministry, and this apathy will soon spill over onto others.

Retain Leaders

Recruiting team members through vision makes it possible to retain people for the long term. People who join the small-group ministry because they believe in the vision for the ministry are committed. They long to see the vision become a reality, so they’re likely to stay on the team for years to come—even until the vision is realized.

The Power of Vision

Vision must inform the group strategy if you want to see success. Creating a long-term strategy for small-group ministry is very difficult for many. Often this is because the point person has no vision for where they want the ministry to go. Without a vision, it's difficult to choose a strategy that will result in a good outcome. On the other hand, when a point person has a clear vision, it's much easier to build an effective strategy to move the ministry toward the desired outcome.

Unify the Ministry

A deeply instilled vision is the unifying factor for the entire small-group ministry team. When everyone is on the same page, dreaming the same dream, there are fewer points of dissension, less concern for who gets the spotlight, and a shared passion that infiltrates the heart of every team member.

What's Your Vision?

You'll know you've embraced a vision from God for your ministry when it's a God-sized vision. God never calls his people to accomplish something that is within their own ability to accomplish. Hebrews 11 gives us an incredible list of those people who accomplished God-sized goals. They accomplished their work by living by faith.

When creating the vision statement for your ministry:

1. Pray passionately for God's guidance.
2. Imagine the unimaginable.
3. Silence the voices in your mind that whisper, "That can't be done," or "You're not the right person to do that."
4. Surround yourself with other dreamers and visionaries.
5. Include language that captures the imagination.

Once you have a vision in mind, the next step is to create a statement that describes that vision. This statement should be succinct, easy to memorize, and relevant but not so trendy that it won't relate to people for decades to come.

Your compelling vision statement might be something like:

- To have a small group in every subdivision within a 10-mile radius of our church.
- To have 40% of our adults start a missional group on their street or cul-de-sac, or in the apartment building where they live.
- To have 110% of our weekend attendance connected in groups by making small groups an entryway to our church.

Get the Word Out

Once you can articulate your vision for the ministry in a succinct and compelling vision statement, you must saturate your church with that vision. Only when the vision becomes part of your church will small groups become a transformational force in the church and community.

Saturating the church with the small-group vision will demand viewing the church as a sponge. When a sponge is placed in water, every inch of that sponge, from its inner core to its most outward edge is saturated with water. Make it your goal to have every adult in the church inundated with the vision of the small-group ministry. There are at least six ways to make this happen:

Make Small Groups Core

Be certain that being in a small group is a core value of the church. When small groups are a core value of the church, the middle of the sponge is already soaked, and the vision will extend outward into all facets of church life.

Explain Groups to New Members

Present the small-group ministry vision at each new member's class, group, or event so that every new person in the church understands their importance and goals. Make sure the vision for small groups is given substantial time and passion during this event.

Pastoral Influence

Have your senior or lead pastor continually cast vision for group life in weekend worship services. My pastor, Josh Howerton, encourages people to join a group and shares stories about group life at least twice a month. We have 90 percent of our adult attendees in a group, and I believe this is directly related to the time, attention, and passion the senior pastor gives to groups from the pulpit.

Team Unity

You can't be the only person who can articulate the vision. Instead, your coaches and leaders must know and be able to verbalize the vision statement whenever possible. As a team, you'll reach many more people than you could on your own. Plus, a personal invitation from someone already involved in small groups—who can clearly articulate the vision—goes a long way for new people who are considering joining a group.

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

At every small-group leader gathering, repeat the vision statement of the ministry. It's easy to believe that once we've said it, our teams will remember. But over time, we forget the vision. Your team should be reminded of the vision statement at least every 30 days.

Consistency

Verbalize the vision statement every chance you get in whatever setting you're in. Whether you're meeting with a leader one-on-one, talking with new church members, or explaining the ministry results to the staff team, share the vision. It's ideal if everyone you work with can easily state your vision simply because they've heard it so much.

If you'll go through the process to find God's vision is for your small-group ministry, create a vision statement that captures what you see in your mind's eye, recruit your team with it, and saturate the church in it, you'll see a new level of anticipation in your team. When the vision is

clear, you can create a strategy that will move your team in the direction God is leading, and you'll experience God working in your ministry in ways you never dreamed possible.

—Rick Howerton is a discipleship and small group specialist; copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What vision has God give you for your small-group ministry?
2. Can you articulate that vision in a succinct, compelling statement? Can your team members? If not, how might you craft a vision statement?
3. How can you get the word out about your vision and saturate your church with it?

Choose the Right Model for Your Church

How to sort through small-group models to find the one that fits your context.

Alan Danielson

As a small-group consultant and pastor, I talk to a lot of church leaders about their small-group models. There are many different approaches to small-group ministry, and choosing the right approach (or approaches) for your context can be challenging. With that in mind, I believe small-group ministry leaders can be lumped into three broad categories.

The Frustrated

Many pastors and small-group point leaders are stumped because small-group ministry just isn't working at their church. They tell me about all the great models and strategies that they've adapted from other churches, but they feel like nothing they try seems to work. They can't seem to answer the question, "Why isn't my group ministry working?"

The Paralyzed

These group ministry leaders feel confused because there are so many small-group models and strategies that they don't know which ones to implement. The sheer volume of choices and voices regarding small-group ministry approaches makes them freeze up. They can't seem to answer the question, "Which approaches should I implement?"

The Composed

Some point leaders and pastors are content with the direction in which their group ministry is headed. While they have the drive and desire to accomplish more in their ministry, they have a calm demeanor about it. They're able to make decisions about their ministry easily, and it seems like they intuitively make the right choices. The composed leaders are the envy of the frustrated and the paralyzed because the composed always seem to find the answer to the challenges their ministries face.

Why are some small-group pastors and ministry leaders composed while others are left frustrated or paralyzed? The answer is in knowing your church's DNA. Composed leaders have learned the secret: Think DNA first, leadership second, and models last.

Why DNA Matters

The greatest mistake that many pastors make is assuming that their problem is rooted in a model, system, or strategy. But the problems you're facing in your small-group ministry aren't actually model problems—they're DNA problems. The reason your group ministry is stalled or plateaued is most likely due to the fact that your approach to small groups doesn't match the DNA of your church.

Go ahead and finish this statement: *"If it walks like a duck, sounds like a duck, and looks like a duck, it's a..."*

That's right! It's a hummingbird in a duck costume. Gotcha!

What does that have to do with small-group ministry and church DNA? It's entirely possible that the DNA of your church is that of a hummingbird, but you're using duck small-group models. Just because you dress up your ministry to look like the ministry at another church doesn't mean it will work. That church may have duck DNA. If that's the case, it doesn't matter how hard your ministry tries to walk like, sound like, or look like a duck, it will never successfully be a duck.

Church leaders have a tendency to cut and paste models they see working somewhere else. To build a strong and successful group ministry, quit trying to play dress up. Instead, seek to know and fully understand your own church's DNA.

Think DNA First

To discover the DNA of your church, you'll want to consider several factors:

The Senior Leader

Community Christian Church based in Naperville, Illinois, has a great system for apprenticing leaders and creating groups that multiply. I had an opportunity a few years ago to ask COMMUNITY's Lead Pastor, Dave Ferguson, why this model works so well at their church while other churches often flounder with the same approach. He said, "Because this church started as a small group in a dorm room with me and an apprentice leader." His answer had nothing to do with the model. Instead, it had everything to do with the church's DNA. Their model works because it reflects the nature of their church, and a church always reflects the nature of their senior leader (especially if the senior leader is the founding pastor).

In my four years at LifeChurch.tv, I learned that two things in small groups were important to my senior pastor, Craig Groeschel: friendships and further exploration of the weekend message. At the time, the church was running over 20,000 in weekly attendance, and Craig believed so much in these two values that he had two small groups that met in his home every week. As a result, we built our small-group ministry at LifeChurch.tv to revolve around getting as many people as possible into small groups where they could discover new spiritual friendships and use discussion materials that connected directly to the weekend's teaching.

One of the best things you can do to build a strong small-group ministry is understand the heart and mind of your church. Nine times out of ten, that can be done by understanding the heart and mind of your senior pastor. Thus, it's imperative to spend time listening to your church's senior leadership. Find out what really gets your pastor excited about biblical community. Then build a ministry that leans heavily in that direction.

Growth v. Control

In 2005 when I started as the LifeGroups pastor on LifeChurch.tv's biggest campus, we were running about 5,500 people at services and had 181 LifeGroups. Less than two years later, we were running about 6,000 people and had 544 LifeGroups. After that, I became the Executive Director of LifeGroups, and I was responsible for the group ministries on all 13 campuses. By 2009, the small-group ministry had grown to over 1,100 small groups across all campuses.

Our strategy for growth was nothing original to us. We leveraged the campaign method that Saddleback has innovated. Twice per year our pastor would teach a group-centric sermon series. We'd provide video curriculum for hosts and ask everyone to get in a group. It worked well for us.

Looking back, I realize that we structured our system for growth rather than control. I once heard Rick Warren say, "You can structure for growth or you can structure for control, but you can't structure for both." That statement helped me recognize that we habitually structured for growth. Whenever growth would stall, it was because we were trying to structure for control.

Structuring for growth means removing any obstacles that inhibit growth. Most notably, this means lowering the bar for leaders, allowing groups to grow large, and creating easy entry points for new people. The results are explosive numerical expansion—which is exciting, but messy. When churches structure for control, there are more leadership requirements, restrictions on the size and types of groups, and the growth is slower. On the other hand, there's less chaos.

No church swings 100 percent either way. Every pastor wants his or her ministry to grow, but there are some things that have to be controlled. Looking back at LifeChurch.tv and the other churches I've worked, however, I've seen that the most effective churches are those who intentionally choose to stick predominantly to one side or the other.

On one side of the equation we find Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois. They have one of the most tightly controlled small-group models anywhere, and they are very happy with it. The result is that after more than 25 years, they have a remarkably healthy and large group ministry. On the other side of this equation, we find Saddleback who sticks to the side of growth, and they have more people in groups than they have in weekend worship attendance.

There are positive aspects about both biases, but in many ways, growth and control compete with one another. So every group ministry must decide which bias is more in step with their DNA. Small-group ministries that struggle are often trying too hard to mix the oil and water of growth and control. You can definitely have aspects of both, but healthy ministries will lean one way.

Think Leadership Second

In my conversations with small-group ministry leaders, I've seen a recurring theme: lack of leadership. It is, in my estimation, the greatest problem with small-group ministries today.

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In our culture, we look for quick fixes and short cuts. Many churches and pastors are looking for a new group model or approach that will yield faster results. Many are looking for a system that will run itself. Others are looking for ways to downplay the role of the "leader" in groups. The problem with all of these hopes and desires is that they neglect the one thing that makes every model or approach work: leadership.

I've talked to many churches that have clunky, inefficient models and their small-group ministries are thriving. I've also spoken with others who have slick, streamlined models and their small-group ministries are struggling. The principle is this: leadership trumps model every time.

It's fine if you want to call leaders "hosts" or "facilitators." Just don't think that by taking out the word "leader" you've somehow taken leadership out of it. As ministry leaders, it's fine to establish smooth running, machine-like systems for your small-group ministries. Just don't think for a minute that those systems won't require leadership. You must be a strong leader for the ministry, and you must find great leaders to lead in the ministry. Determine what you'll require of leaders and make it clear from the beginning. Then do what's needed to train and support them in their role.

Think Models Third

DNA will help you choose the right leadership and models for your context. As you consider the models that might be **right** for you, think through several questions. Each question below is followed by a subset of questions that will bring clarity. By answering the subsets you'll find your answers to the main questions.

1. What do you want groups to accomplish?

- Why does your church need groups?
- What is the biblical reasoning for this ministry?
- What defines a "win" for a small group in your context?
- What is the definition of "group" in your context, or what makes a group a group? (e.g., frequency of meeting, group size, mission, purpose)

2. What is the structure/control bias of your church?

- Should your church more often structure for growth or control?
- Is your senior pastor more "go with the flow" or more "I want to know every detail"?
- What do you desire more: A faster growing small-group ministry or highly trained small-group leaders? Which does your senior leadership prefer?
- Is your church better equipped to handle the problems associated with growth or control?

3. What is your vision for discipleship?

- How do you know someone is a disciple in your context?
- What is your mental picture of an ideal leader in your context?

- How realistic is that mental picture? Are you asking too much of people? Are you asking too little?
- How do you envision reproducing leaders and disciples? What systems, strategies, and models will help you best reproduce?

When you look at successful small-group ministries, you'll find that each of them is unique. They may have similarities, but each church's model has been custom built to fit their DNA. One of the greatest temptations of small-group ministry leaders is simply to take another church's model and insert it into their context. Resist that temptation! Do the hard work of understanding your church's DNA. Be committed to leading your ministry diligently. Then, and only then, will you be ready to discern between appropriate models.

-Alan Danielson is the Senior Pastor of New Life Bible Church in Norman, Oklahoma, and a small-group consultant; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How have you approached your group strategy in the past?
2. What hasn't worked for your ministry? What does that teach you?
3. What does your church's DNA tell you about which strategies might work in your context?

Which Small-Group Model Is Right for You?

Keep reality in check as you answer these important questions.

Jim Egli

It seems like everyone is looking for the magic diet that will help them lose weight, feel great, and stay healthy for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, almost any diet will work in the short term but seldom brings the long-term results that you seek. To be healthy and trim takes discipline and a discovery of what works for you, personally. There are no quick solutions that bring lasting results.

I've concluded that small-group models are a lot like diets. Like the person that jumps from one diet plan to another elusively looking for the one that really works, many churches jump from one small-group model to another—and are often disappointed.

Cautions About Small-Group Models

Here are my observations and cautions about any small-group model:

1. All models look like the ultimate model when you are reading a book by or attending a conference with the person that designed it.
2. Understand that following innovators can be a little risky. Many books outlining small-group models are written very soon after the model is first envisioned. Very seldom do the books outline a model that has stood the test of time. In fact, it's common for the books to propose things that are not yet tested but are only theory at the time the book is written! And the ultimate irony is that by the time you pick up a book and start implementing its concepts, the model church may have already abandoned certain parts of the model—or the whole thing.
3. Any model will work for about 10–18 months.
4. Some ideas that work great in the short run actually work against long-term success. For example, there's a popular model that lowers the qualifications for small-group leaders in order to increase the number of groups. Such a strategy might give you a lot of bang this month, but long-term growth in small groups requires committed leaders and a thoughtful strategy for leadership development.
5. As helpful as small-group books and conferences are, too often they fail to clearly tell you information beyond the basics that's essential to long-term success. For instance, they won't help you with dynamic leadership meetings, quality training, or proactive coaching.

Finding the Right Model for Your Church

Still, adopting existing small-group models helps churches run ministries without trying to figure out everything for themselves. So what model is best for you? Or, perhaps better put, what models can your church learn the most from?

Here are several questions that will help you answer that:

1. What is your ecclesiology or theology of the church? If you think "church" is a Sunday morning service and "small groups" are a strategy used to improve assimilation, you're model will look very different from a church who desires a church that resembles New Testament Christianity. So, what do you really believe about church?
2. What is the purpose of a small group? Is it primarily for learning, relationships, mission, or something else? Is it a once-a-week meeting? Is it a group of believers who share life together throughout the week?
3. What happens when a small group meets? Is it simply a Sunday school class moved into a home? What will the group do together? What do you hope they will accomplish?
4. How will your pastor or pastors relate to the small-group ministry? How will he or she be involved in overseeing, mobilizing, and training for the ministry? Will he or she mostly be hands-off or intimately involved?
5. What are your thoughts on specialty and short-term groups? Do they have a place in your outreach strategy or how you welcome new members? If so, how will they fit into your small-group ministry?

There's no quick-fix small-group model for your church. There are a lot of things you can learn from other churches and the models they use, but long-term success is going to take diligence, humility, and seeking God for your church's unique situation. Learn from others as well as from your own mistakes. If God has put a clear vision for a thriving small-group ministry in your heart, you can see it come to fruition as you persist and continue to invite his Spirit to enliven your church through life-giving smallgroups.

-Jim Egli; copyright 2006 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Which models are you aware of? What do you like about the different models?
2. What models have you tried in the past? What were the pros and cons of each?
3. What are your answers to the questions in the article? How do your answers help you understand which models might work for your church?

Multiple Models in One Ministry

Why you should consider incorporating several types of groups

Allen White

One of the beautiful things about small groups is that they're highly customizable—at least that's the beauty for the group leaders. Tracking multiple types of small groups, on the other hand, can be a headache for the small-group pastor or director.

That's why it makes more sense to many pastors to use one model across the entire small-group ministry. It's efficient and easy to keep track of. Pastors are busy people who need all the efficiency they can get.

In a perfectly efficient world, pastors could use one system to connect, train, and organize the entire congregation into groups. Unfortunately, there are no systems like this. On top of that, it's not what's best for the people who will be involved in group life. When there's only one type of group model, people are forced to respond with "yes" or "no"—take it or leave it. And the fact is that many will say "no" because that model doesn't fit their needs.

Now, don't get me wrong, I like systems and control (especially the second one). A single group model is easier for me to manage, lead, and develop. There's only one thing wrong with this picture: there's just too much "me."

We live in a world of infinite choices. For instance, someone can walk into Starbucks and order one of 87,000 drink combinations—and that's just coffee. People can flip through hundreds of cable channels to find exactly what they want to watch, or surf the billions of sites on the Internet for hours to learn more about a specific hobby or trend. In the church, however, pastors believe everyone should fit into one neat system for discipleship. Then they wonder why only 30 percent (or fewer) of their church members are interested in small groups. One size simply does not fit all. People need a variety of ways to connect and grow.

Tending a Garden of Groups

In my early years of group ministry, I tried to identify the perfect strategy for small groups. I read some great books and attended seminars and conferences. Then God gave me a new picture of groups: an image of plants in a nursery with the small-group pastor as the gardener. All of the groups need water, sunlight, and nutrients. But they don't all need the same amounts, and they certainly don't grow at the same rates.

This image caused me to realize that some groups serve best by offering intensive Bible study, and others serve best by centering on support for a particular issue, or even on a common hobby. Some groups thrive when they meet to discuss the weekend's message. Others thrive when they can choose a study to meet a felt need. Diversity and variety work well with groups.

All of this begs the question: What is a small group? If we encourage our groups to (1) connect with and care for each other, (2) apply God's Word, and (3) serve others, groups can take on an

infinite number of formats. This can happen in a women's weekday Bible study, an evening couples' group, a motorcycle group, and even a Sunday school class. On the other hand, if our definition dictates that a small group meets weekly in a home to discuss the weekend sermon, there's only one way to participate in group life. Some will take it. Others will leave it.

When the church I served in California managed to connect 125 percent of the average adult attendance into groups, we were using five different group models simultaneously. Some have asked me if that created confusion. The truth is each small group was only following one model—the leaders weren't confused. The only potential confusion was mine.

How to Incorporate Several Models

When considering using several models simultaneously, here are a few things to think about:

1. What groups do you already have?

When I arrived at my new assignment in South Carolina, I discovered women's Bible studies, men's accountability groups, parenting groups, couples' groups, singles' groups, off-campus groups, on-campus groups, free market groups, host home groups, and adult Sunday school classes. After assessing the groups to see if they met the above criteria—connection and care, Bible application, and serving others—I blessed them and left them alone.

This is where small-group pastors and directors often make a mistake. The temptation is to consolidate a hodgepodge of groups into one system or to align them with a single method. A lot of effort goes into breaking what doesn't need fixing. To force existing groups to accept a new model in a common system doesn't make sense.

2. Where do you want your next wave of groups to go?

While you shouldn't coerce your existing groups to head in a new direction, you can direct new groups into a new initiative. Your initiative might be introducing service into group life or focusing on accountability in groups.

At the church I served at in South Carolina, our initiative was a practical one: only start new groups off campus because we were running out of space. When we trained our new leaders, we stated up front that groups would meet in homes or in a public place like Starbucks or Barnes and Noble. There simply weren't any rooms available on campus for new groups.

With this new initiative, there are two important things to note. First of all, no group currently meeting on campus was asked to move off campus. I didn't want to break what was working. And second, over the course of four years, we started four groups on campus who had no other place to meet, including a group for single moms where the church provided the childcare. These were exceptions. We let them be exceptions. And that's okay.

3. Who do you need to connect?

If the church is in a place where 70 percent or more need to be connected into groups, then a church-wide campaign can be an effective way to recruit a large number of leaders and connect members into groups. People offer to open up their homes and either invite friends to join them or welcome people assigned from the church. A video-based curriculum helps the host facilitate the discussion and takes away the fear factor of leadership.

If the church is already mostly connected into some sort of groups, then a church-wide campaign could provide great synergies among your existing groups. More than likely, though, it won't produce an overabundance of new groups. There's a reason why the last 30 percent or so haven't joined the type of groups you've offered: they don't like them. They might prefer getting together with a couple of friends at a coffee shop. They might have odd work schedules. Or they might be looking for a type of support or study that you're currently not offering. Church-wide campaigns won't help connect these people into groups. You'll have to figure out what they're looking for first.

4. How is God inspiring people to meet?

If you remove the limits from group formation, potential leaders will become very creative. In our church in California, a leader started a group on a commuter train. Every Tuesday morning, the group gathered in a section of the train on their way to work. A group of engineers in downtown Tampa couldn't make it home to the suburbs in time to have a group, so they met during lunch at their workplace. A group of law enforcement officers formed a first responders' small group because they could speak each other's language and weren't asked to fix other group members' speeding tickets anymore. A group of guys met weekly for Bible study and several times a month to make barbecue. They're called the "Holy Smokers."

If you offer an invitation for people to innovate, they'll present new and creative ideas for group life. If you keep them firmly within the boundaries of one group system, they'll take it or leave it. Sure you might have some odd ball ideas, but those are the exceptions, not the rule. And they might just meet the needs of some of the people still unconnected at your church.

5. How do you train and coach groups formed from multiple models?

When it comes down to it, all groups are expected to meet the same goals: provide connection and care, Bible study, and service. It's just how they go about it that will vary from group model to group model. You don't need separate systems to manage different groups. You will, however, need to coach these different leaders in unique ways as they face conflict and challenges. On the other hand, all leaders need training in many of the same topics. It's possible to bring group leaders together around common topics for training, yet coach them individually within their specialty.

In the last church I served in, I led a monthly meeting of volunteer leaders who oversaw our entire small-group ministry. Each person at the table was responsible for a different type of group: men, women, couples, singles, parents, and neighborhood. Each of them coached the leaders specific

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to the type of groups they oversaw. That way one person was overseeing all similar groups in the ministry, and when these six leaders came together, we had an accurate picture of what was happening across our entire small-group ministry.

There is beauty in the potential for diversity in group life, and that diversity doesn't need to cause a headache. As your small-group ministry grows, you'll have to rethink your leadership structure, but don't allow that work to hold you back from creating the kinds of groups your people need. As you diversify your groups and allow several models to exist, you'll have greater opportunities for connecting the unconnected in your church and for seeing amazing spiritual growth.

-Allen White is a pastor, teacher, writer, and speaker; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How do you feel about incorporating multiple models into your ministry?
2. What groups do you already have? Are they meeting the requirements laid out in the article?
3. Who are you trying to connect? What model or models might meet that audience?

Your Cheat Sheet on Models

A brief overview of popular group models

Amy Jackson

It's never a good idea simply to cut and paste another church's small-group model into your own context. On the other hand, taking an existing model and customizing it for your church can be a much easier process than coming up with something entirely new on your own. Below you'll find six of the major models commonly used. You can find much more information on models at SmallGroups.com.

<p>Host Groups</p>	<p>Made popular by Saddleback, this model finds leaders who “simply push play” on a video. Hosts are asked to invite a few friends to join them for a 6-week series where they watch videos and answer a few questions. These usually tie into the sermon series. After the six weeks, groups are invited to continue on.</p> <p>Pros/Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Easy to start lots of new groups at once + Always enough groups to connect people + Large pool of possible leaders - Hosts get minimal training for facilitating discussion - Groups depend heavily on the content of videos - Churches must create or find video curriculum that all groups can use at once
<p>High Control Groups</p>	<p>These groups go by many names. The point is that all leaders are chosen carefully, trained thoroughly, and then given a lot of autonomy to lead their group as they check in with a coach periodically. They're “high control” because it's a defined process with checks and balances. North Point, Willow Creek, and Community Christian (Naperville, IL) have all used this model.</p> <p>Pros/Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Leaders can be trusted to lead and shepherd group members + Leaders are equipped to handle tough group issues + Leaders are able to find their own studies, lessening the workload on the ministry point person - The process of choosing and training leaders takes time - It's difficult to start a lot of new groups at once because you may not have enough leaders at once - The training/support structure requires a lot of time and people
<p>Missional Small Groups</p>	<p>Missional groups are on the r live on mission. These groups are heavily involved in their communities, reaching out to people far from God, and to those on the margins. They're not simply involved in occasional outreach events—mission is a core value, and they regularly build relationships with outsiders.</p>

	<p>Pros/Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Groups are following God as they actively live on mission + Real issues and hard situations push missional groups to prayer and Bible study with new urgency + Group members bond in a unique way as they serve together - Missional activities are, by nature, very messy, and they don't have clear guidelines on how to handle them - It's difficult to program missional living, so there must be high intrinsic value for group members - Missional groups can easily become discouraging, so you'll need to find ways to encourage groups often
Closed Groups	<p>It takes time to build deep, meaningful relationships. Many churches want the bonds experienced in small groups to continue growing over many years. Once a group begins, they meet "for life," and they are closed to new members. New members are only grouped into new groups.</p> <p>Pros/Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Group members experience life together for the long haul + Intimacy is able to grow in unique ways over time + Group members really get to know one another's families - In our transient society, group members often move away leaving the group small and struggling - New members and believers don't get the benefit of being in group with older members. - Most groups grow stagnant over time without some change and may simply become a social group
Free Market Groups	<p>These groups are formed around some type of affinity, from sports to life stage. The assumption is that people like choices, so the small-group ministry offers several. In addition, it may be easier to connect some people nervous about small groups to a group for people who have a shared interest.</p> <p>Pros/Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Relationships naturally form around a shared interest + Easy to invite non-believers into the group + Reaches people through felt needs - Groups may not be focused on discipleship - Being a group with people who are all like you doesn't give an accurate picture of the church - Groups tend not to last very long and group members may not get connected elsewhere
Geographical Groups	<p>As we commute further to work and have less and less time at home, many churches are turning to groups based on geographical location to make attending groups easier. Plus, this allows groups to have a presence in their community.</p>

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Creating a Small-Group Structure

Whether you're examining a current structure or starting from scratch, begin here.

Maegan Stout

A few years ago, we blew up our small-group system. We knew the current structure at National Community Church in Washington, D.C. wasn't working, and we asked our Zone Leaders for help figuring out what would work. As their name indicates, Zone Leaders were volunteers responsible for the small groups within their respective areas. Some were geographically based, while others were based on type of group—like men's groups. Zone leaders did it all: trained leaders, helped leaders smooth out ugly situations in their groups, and made sure leaders registered their groups on time. But when Paul told us to be all things to all people, I don't think he had small-group registration in mind. The truth is, our Zone Leaders had specific gifts and wiring, and asking them to wear every hat didn't maximize their potential or honor their passions.

We called this endeavor "Operation KaBoom" because the old system was completely demolished. The way we train leaders, coach and care for leaders, and organize the logistics of small groups altered drastically. Operation KaBoom allowed us to take a hard look at our existing structure and decide what should stay and what should change. We certainly have not discovered a perfect system, or even perfected the system we currently have. But I'd like to share some practical principles we discovered in the process of creating a new structure.

Ask Good Questions

Before you do anything, answer some critical questions. Hudson Taylor, an English missionary to China, said, "Do not have your concert first, and then tune your instrument afterwards. Begin the day with the Word of God in prayer, and get first of all into harmony with Him." The same applies to small-group ministry. It would be a huge mistake to figure out a structure before understanding God's thoughts on community.

Here are some important questions to ask:

- Why does your church do groups?
- How does group life fit into the big picture of your church?
- Why are you personally doing groups? How did God call you to this ministry?
- What is your philosophy on community and discipleship?
- What is the purpose you hope groups will fulfill?

Spend time searching the Scriptures. Become intimately aware of what Jesus says about community. Pray a lot. Not only will it set you up to articulate your vision for group life well, but it will also set a firm foundation for ministry. Make sure you are rooted in the right place and your convictions on discipleship are biblical.

Other helpful questions:

- What role does/will your lead pastor play in group life?
- How does/will small-group ministry interact with other ministries in the church?
- How much of the congregation will be involved in groups?
- How do you plan to grow the small-group ministry?

From there, be able to articulate your vision in 10 minutes, in two minutes, and in one line. You will share your vision all the time, so you'll need to know how to share it quickly and succinctly. Understandably, you may get tired of sharing the vision repeatedly. Consider the purpose Jesus gives to biblical community, though. In John 17, Christ prayed we would experience community the way he experiences community with the Father. He said that the world would know that he is real by the love his disciples have for one another. That's true community. So even if you get tired of sharing your vision over and over, your vision is worth repeating.

Consider Important Factors

Group life happens in real life. Familiarize yourself with major small-group models, but don't copy and paste. Your model should be as unique as your community. Decide what kinds of groups you'll have based on the demographics, natural rhythms, and culture of your church.

Demographics

Demographics really matter. Consider the age and marital status of the people in your congregation, whether parents would like their children involved, and if your church is in a large city or a small town. You would structure things differently for a large number of college students than you would for a church of older, married couples.

Rhythms

Here in D.C. most of the city revolves around the congressional and university calendars. It makes sense for our group life to be on a semester system, too, so we're following the natural rhythms of our city. What are the rhythms of your community?

Culture

One aspect we've always had is the Free Market system. This system is based around the belief that groups should emerge organically from the needs of the community and the gifts and passions of the leader. D.C. is full of inspired and ambitious 20- and 30-year-olds. The best way to incorporate them into the life of the church is to come alongside them and empower the calling God has placed on their life. What is your culture like? How do people need to grow? What are the defining factors that set the tone for your community?

Invest in Leaders

As a trainer on our discipleship team, I spend most of my time and resources investing in leaders. I am a big believer that if the group leaders are healthy, their groups will be, too. Two big

questions we asked during Operation KaBoom were how we should train leaders and how we should care for leaders.

Training

Training is the practical skill development of small-group leadership. It teaches leaders how to lead well and can encompass everything from why it's important to have food at group meetings to how to handle difficult situations. Training is like an instruction guide for building biblical community in the small-group environment. When developing training, think through content and how to strategically deliver the message.

At NCC, we organize training into four categories:

- **Leadership 101.** This training is what new leaders need to know their first semester of leadership. We actually embed the new leader application into Leadership 101. Online training allows us to ask pointed questions and gauge how the material is processed.
- **Situational Training.** Let's be honest: we can teach how to navigate a group crisis at any time, but it only sinks in when a leader is actually struggling with one. One leader at NCC had a group member develop MS, a group member's father pass away, and another member confess to living with her boyfriend . . . all in the same semester. While the leader was faithfully attending training events, there was certain information she needed "on demand."
- **Leadership Modules.** These are ongoing modules that help the leader lead themselves well and grow in the character and ways of God. Typically, these modules are reviewed online and later discussed in the context of a one-on-one coaching relationship.
- **Leadership Retreat and Leadership Summits.** Live training events to cast vision and honor leaders are imperative to the culture of our church. These events are strategic opportunities to invest in leaders by commissioning and empowering them corporately.

Coaching

While training equips the head with helpful material, coaching cares for the heart of the leader. Each leader is assigned a coach at NCC, and coaching is required during a new leader's first semester of leadership (then leaders can choose whether to continue with a coach). The big question our coaches ask is "how are you doing, *really*?" Coaches act as a guide for both group and personal growth. The role of a coach at NCC is not to give advice or answer questions, but to ask the right questions and listen well. How you will care for your leaders is one of the most important questions you need to ask when developing a small-group structure.

Group Logistics

One advantage to structuring groups based on rhythm is that it provides strategic opportunities to promote group life to the congregation. We spend a lot of time and money creating a professional grade directory to advertise groups. One semester, however, we decided it was a waste of money. We just put groups online and slapped them on a sheet of paper that was placed at the Connection Table at weekend services. Our leaders couldn't be more disappointed.

It was as if we'd let them down personally. In taking away the directory, we unintentionally diminished their role in the life of the church. The directory ascribed significance to groups and affirmation to the leader.

Your Leadership

Leading yourself well is the most important part of authentic leadership. Paul's call to those who followed him was "follow me as I follow Christ." If we're going to make that kind of claim, we had better be leaders worth following. Here are three tips that will help you lead yourself well.

Have a Team

Bottom line: you can't teach community alone. Model by example. You'll need key influencers in your church, people who have a perspective that challenges you, people who are natural networkers, and people with something to teach you. And you'll also need a few people you just really like. Sanity checks and laughter are worth a spot on the roster.

Have an Apprentice

Community isn't discipleship until we pass it on. Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 (NLT), "You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others." Passing discipleship on is the strategic plan of Christ (Matthew 28:19–20). Make sure you are apprenticing someone as well as encouraging all your coaches and leaders to be apprenticing someone.

Disciple People, Not Programs

Ultimately, God is not going to hold you accountable for how well you implemented a program. Systems don't make disciple-makers; people do. Leadership comes with a responsibility toward the people we disciple. And this means being willing to blow up a system that isn't working—even if you created it. Our role as leaders and pastors of group life is to create environments for people to grow in their faith and experience Christ in the context of community. Be willing to "KaBoom" when necessary.

—Maegan Stout trains small-group leaders at National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What demographics, rhythms, and cultural factors do you need to consider?
2. In what ways will you invest in your leaders? What kinds of training will you pursue?
3. How can you improve your own leadership based on the three tips above?

Customize Your Group Strategy

4 keys to get you there

Mark Howell

In the same way that you have a unique fingerprint, your church is unique. You're made unique by the custom combination of passions, gifts and abilities of your members. You're made unique by your setting. You're made unique by your history.

Makes sense, right? You may not like who you are, your fingerprint. And you may even be trying to change who you are. You may want to be a whole different church. But you still need to understand who you are and who you want to become, and then choose a group strategy that fits. Easier said than done, right? Let's talk about four keys to customize your group strategy.

Clarify the Win

Clarify what a win will be for your ministry. What are you going to call success? If groups will play a primary role in making disciples, it would be fair to ask, "What percentage of our members and attendees need to be involved in a group?" Another very good question would be, "What kinds of Christ-followers do we want to produce?" "What would they be like?" Still another might be, "Do we want groups to be an entry point for non-members, or will our groups be for our members and attendees only?"

Name Your Customer

The next step is to think about who your real customer is (or will be). This is an important step that is often missed. Keep in mind that in this case, a customer is not just the people who are already part of a group. You'll also need to think about the people who are not yet in a group. Their interests and needs will be a clue that will help you figure out what it may take to invite them to try a group. Developing an accurate understanding of your customer is a key step.

Make Goals

Plan the steps that will lead to the win that you've identified. For example, determining that you want 100% of your adults to be involved in a group will require a series of steps that will make that possible. Depending on the percentage of your adults that are unconnected, you may be need to choose a strategy that can move slowly. If you're growing and you have a lot of unconnected adults, you may need a strategy that will enable you to start a lot of new groups all at once. The key is to be very practical, bring in some nuts-and-bolts people, and really think through getting from where you are to the win that you've identified.

Evaluate

Another very important key is the tough job of determining if there are existing steps that don't lead to the win you've identified. For instance, if your win is 100% of your adults in groups, you'll need to identify what you might be doing to keep people from committing to a group. If you're

still promoting a mid-week service, for example, you may need to evaluate whether the adults in your congregation will give you two weeknights in addition to Sunday morning.

Next Steps

Ideally, this is a process that should be done with a team. Taking the time to thoughtfully work through these four keys will yield a customized strategy, but it will take time and persistence. Keep it simple. You ought to be able to fit everything on a page. Pull the page out any time you are talking about what to do next.

—Mark Howell is the founder of *SmallGroupResources.net* and the Pastor of Communities at Canyon Ridge Christian Church. This article is adapted from [his blog](#) and is used with permission.

Discuss

1. What is the win for your small groups? How will you know they're accomplishing the goal?
2. Who are you trying to connect in small groups?
3. Name at least three goals that can move you in the direction of your win.

Design a Training Strategy

Highly effective group leaders are developed over time.

Greg Bowman

Ever get one of these voicemails? "Hi, my name is Susan. I went on a spiritual retreat this weekend to try to discern where God wants me to invest the next five years of my life in serving. Through a series of conversations it became clear to me that God is asking me to consider leading a small group. I led groups for ten years in my previous church, and I wondered if you might have some time to talk. Please call me."

Me neither.

We want highly effective small-group leaders who truly "get it." We seek leaders who understand and own the vision, leaders who are a joy to coach. We want groups that are growing spiritually, where stories of life change seem to emerge weekly.

But here's the hard, cold reality: highly effective group leaders are developed over time—they don't just show up in your office. It can be challenging to craft an intentional, strategic, proactive plan for developing current and future group leaders. Perhaps that's why many churches simply fire randomly with their training, hoping that some of it will hit the mark.

While some staff members have the privilege of being singularly focused on group life, many wear multiple hats. The immediate and urgent pressures of ministry can crowd out the important task of leadership development. So here are some steps to help us move towards a long-term leadership training and development strategy.

Determine the Goal

You don't want to craft your strategy alone. The best thinking and planning happens in teams. As you consider potential team members, include a mixture of people who are creative, think outside the box, and are critical thinkers. Now it's time to dream. Grab some paper or a tablet to take notes as you brainstorm with your team. Why does your small group ministry really exist? What are you hoping to accomplish in and through groups? If an individual is part of your group ministry for five years, how will his or her life be different?

When we did this at Willow Creek, we ended up with four key purposes for our group life ministry: transformation, compassion, community, and mission. Allow plenty of time for this discussion. Depending on the size of your church, this can be a lengthy process. We wrestled with our key purposes for a couple of months before landing on those four.

This step is important because it will help form the foundation for your overall training strategy. Once you have clarified the overall purpose of the ministry, then you can begin to answer the next question: What kind of leader do we need in order to achieve that goal?

Decide the Skills

Educators are familiar with the terms scope and sequence. Scope deals with the topics and content of the training you will offer your leaders. The key question in training is: What do you want your leaders to be able to do when the training is over?

Then it's time to brainstorm again. Gather with your team and begin to list all the possible training needs in your ministry. As you work through this process, keep in mind the overall purpose of your ministry as defined above.

We did this a number of years ago at Willow. We pulled 20 people in a room and handed them all sticky notes. For over an hour, we brainstormed. When we finished there were scores of notes stuck to the walls (and the doors and the windows). The list was not exhaustive, but it was exhausting! It included things like:

- How to plan a small-group meeting
- How to listen well and ask good questions
- How to add new people
- How to choose and use curriculum in a group
- How to do conflict resolution
- How to solve problems within group life

Each note has the potential to become a training topic. Once the list is complete, begin to group them under the purposes of your ministry. Look for similar themes that would work together in a training package.

This can be a difficult and time consuming task, but the payoff—a well-crafted training strategy—is more than worth it!

Establish the Pace

Next is the sequence portion and it matters a great deal. In mathematics, it's critical that the learners have basic skills before moving on to more advanced content. Teaching math might sequence out like this: counting—writing numbers—addition—subtraction—multiplication—division—algebra—geometry—trigonometry—calculus.

Likewise, sequencing is important in your leader training. Rising leaders, new leaders, and seasoned leaders each have unique developmental needs. Conflict resolution skills are important, but may not be necessary in the first round of training for rising leaders.

Keep it simple at first. What are the basic skills that leaders need? What will be the core of your training? There will be time to make the training more robust later. For now, keep it simple.

Another issue in establishing the pace is to determine the most opportune times in your church life to offer training. How frequently can leaders be expected to come to classroom training, check in on the website, or meet with a mentor or coach? What is a sustainable pace—one that equips leaders and still enables them to shepherd and guide their group?

Begin to chart what the overall training calendar could look like for the next 12 months.

Choose a Delivery System

Not every training need is best met in a classroom setting! Make use of all four of the training quadrants.

Mentoring

This is one aspect of a coach's relationship with their leaders. Many skills are taught and modeled in one-on-one settings. Other methods of mentoring could include peer mentoring (seasoned and new leaders paired for a time), table discussions at leadership gatherings, or seeking out time one-on-one with a legendary leader in the church. One church has established a hotline that leaders can call with questions or challenges and receive peer mentoring. Leaders know they can call the hotline on Tuesdays, for example, to get their questions answered.

Self-Directed

Books, videos, and websites (including the many free articles on SmallGroups.com) are great training resources for group leaders. Build a lending library and encourage leaders to sharpen their skills as they drive to work or over their lunch hour. Monthly web-based newsletters and online training are also great tools for self-directed learning.

Classroom

This is the hardest quadrant to deliver well on a consistent basis. While it has its place, classroom training is overused. Reserve this quadrant for skills that cannot be learned any other way.

On-the-Job

There is no substitute for this! Roger Schank, a respected authority on adult learning at Northwestern University in Chicago, says that we really only learn one way: trying, failing, and practicing. That is what this quadrant is all about. So, as leaders face difficult situations, train them to handle it as it's happening.

Match the delivery system to the way the skills are best learned. For example, shepherding conversations are best learned in a role-play or in a one-on-one conversation. But remember that variety is the key. The more variety you have in your delivery systems, the more accessible your training becomes.

Identify the Obstacles

Try to determine what might keep people from participating in your training. As simple as this step sounds, it's easily missed.

A few years back, I asked my leaders why they weren't attending the classroom training we offered. The answer: "It's all on Sunday night, and that's when my group meets!" We were doing training when it was easiest to get trainers and rooms at the church, not when it was best for leaders.

Talk with your current coaches and leaders. Float your training ideas past them and get their insights into potential obstacles. If you want the real scoop on the obstacles, gather some of the leaders who never participate in training. Give them the freedom to tell you why. It is an eye-opener. Here is what I've found from those individuals:

- Location: Too far to travel or too inconvenient
- Content: It's not relevant, helpful, fun, or creative in the way it is delivered. Hear that as "boring."
- Duration: It is too long! Give me training in bite-sized pieces. Make it an hour long or two at the most, not a four-week, 8-hour training.
- Communication: I didn't learn about it in time. (I also heard that the publicity did not strike at a felt need, so they opted out.)
- Childcare: If care is not provided by the church, attendance at training events can become costly or simply too much of a hassle.

Once you've identified the obstacles, do your best to remove them. Continue to listen to leaders to see if new or unforeseen obstacles arise.

Gather Feedback

Once you've launched the first components of your new training strategy, check in with leaders. Is it helpful? Is it worth the investment of time and energy? Does it add value to their leadership? What would they change?

At a 30,000 foot level, go back to your leadership team and evaluate. Are we producing the kind of leaders we desire? Is the atmosphere in the groups what we desire it to be? How is our plan working, really? As Ken Blanchard says, "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." Get feedback from every angle possible to help determine the effectiveness of your strategy.

Your commitment to craft, refine, deliver, and evaluate a long-term training strategy is essential to the sustainability of your ministry. To be honest, this is not glamorous work, but equipping, motivating, and encouraging your group leaders will keep them in the game long-term and will encourage them to invite others to join the leadership team. It will raise the quality of group life, and it will help you achieve the purposes of your group ministry.

—Greg Bowman is Spiritual Formation Pastor at West Ridge Community Church in Elgin, Illinois; copyright 2005 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What is the goal of your groups?
2. What basic training do new leaders need as they begin? What additional training would they need long-term?
3. What methods of training might you use to accomplish your goals?

Build a Coaching System

When you build the people, the people build the ministry.

Bill Donahue, Ph.D.

Few leaders understand what it takes to lead and build a growing coaching system to support small-group ministry. Building this at Willow Creek was an adventure with successes and failures along the way! But we learned some coaching lessons that I'd like to pass along.

1. Maintain Healthy Spans of Care

How many leaders a coach can care for depends on ministry requirements and the coach's other work, family, and life responsibilities. Emulating Jethro's Exodus 18 wisdom—using the ratio of 1:5 to ensure care for all without anyone caring for too many—we concluded that most coaches should care for no more than five leaders. We also ask them *not* to lead a small group, so they can focus on developing small-group leaders.

2. Coaches Are People—Not Pipelines

In our zeal to get on with the next ministry initiative, we at times neglected our coaches. Once a needed lifeline to sustain the ministry, they soon became mere channels through which we could distribute ministry responsibilities. In other words, the coaching structure became a collection of pipelines, a set of impersonal spiritual plumbing used for delivering the next new ministry project.

A coaching structure is needed, but it must maintain a shepherding flavor. Coaches need to be pulled aside from their ministry responsibilities for ongoing development, care, and support. The coach must be seen in the same way as a leader—as a person with needs, goals, and concerns. We must remember: The structure must support the people—the people don't exist to support the structure.

The bottom line is that leaders want shepherding first, teaching and training second, and leadership (vision, instructions on what to do, how to manage their ministry, etc.) last. To help with this, we developed the 80/20 leadership rule: You have to feed leaders 80 percent of the time in order to earn the right to lead them the other 20 percent. We realized we had to earn the relational authority to disciple and lead our people. Simpler said, "Love 'em, then lead 'em!"

3. Beware of Stagnation in Coaching Huddles

Huddles are the single hardest thing a coach has to do. It takes planning and vision to make a huddle experience worth attending. Great huddles demand creativity, engaging communication, and a better than average aptitude for spiritual nurture and stimulus. We have learned to increase huddle attendance and effectiveness by creating "super huddles." Rather than laying the entire burden of a great huddle on the coach's shoulders, a staff member organizes a quarterly gathering of several coaching huddles in one room. Here we can relieve coaches of ministry planning and training responsibilities. The result is greater community, more energy, and wider

resources and interactions. The rhythm of regular huddles and quarterly super huddles throughout the ministry season seems to serve the small-group leaders quite well.

4. Make Encouragement the Focus of Group Visits

Coaches who visit their leaders' small groups sometimes feel like uninvited wedding guests. Everyone wonders, "Who are you, and why are you here? Do we know you?" Encouragement is the best antidote for small-group members' discomfort. Coaches visit groups to observe and assess, but these visits are more powerful when the coach goes in as an encouragement maniac. Warmly greeting members as they arrive at the meeting, encouraging the group, affirming the leader in front of the group, and praying with the leader before and after the meeting will raise the comfort level.

5. Don't Settle for Superficial One-on-Ones

Coaches meeting one-on-one with small-group leaders find it tempting to stick to business. They start safe discussions about curriculum choices, group attendance and church issues.

How do coaches overcome the superficiality barrier? Learn to love the leaders. Ask searching questions. What is their love language? Where do they struggle? What would help them grow most? How best can you serve them and their family? Simple acts of service also help coaches remind leaders how much they care. One-on-one times with leaders should focus on care and growth, not "So what do you think about the crisis in the Middle East?" Leaders can get that anywhere; they can only get support from you.

6. Invest in Coaches Personally and as a Group

As the small-group pastor, you should spend about two hours per coach each week. This includes prayer, development, skill training, recruiting apprentice coaches, and individual time. Get your coaches together for meals, meet them at work, and invite them and their spouses to dinner. This is a relational ministry, and they will reproduce in their leaders what they see in you. Once a year, have a retreat or gathering for coaches that honors them, teaches them, and builds their spirits—even if you only have three to five coaches.

Selecting great coaches and giving them full support will help you make great strides toward a system that works. After all, the "system" is people; and when you build the people, the people build the ministry. Select proven leaders who have shepherd's hearts and a vision for the ministry.

—Bill Donahue is a small-group consultant and co-author of [Building a Life-Changing Small-Group Ministry](#); copyright 2002 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How are you handling coaching right now? How well is it working?
2. Who in your ministry could serve as a coach?
3. What are your goals for coaches as they work with group leaders?

7 Signs You Have a Bad Ministry Design

Is your small-group structure struggling?

Mark Howell

A few years ago, I decided to take up running. Looking for a pair of shoes designed for the kind of running I would be doing, I went online and did some research. I found some great Nike shoes perfectly designed for running.

I also have a favorite pair of Sanuks. They're great for bumming around, hanging out, and walking across a hot, sandy beach. I love them. But I'd never wear them running. They aren't designed for running. They're designed for casual wear.

In the same way different shoes are designed for different results, our ministries must be specially designed for the results we desire. I love this quote from Andy Stanley: "Your ministry is perfectly designed to produce the results you're currently experiencing." If you don't like the results you're currently experiencing, you need to acknowledge that you have a bad design and change it.

I'm not suggesting that a design needs to be abandoned immediately or after only one attempt. But you should keep in mind that sticking with the same design after multiple attempts may reflect a stewardship issue. After all, there is a cost when the mission is delayed. Watch out for these seven signs that you have a bad design for your ministry.

1. Your percentage of connected adults is flatlined.

To find your percent of connected adults, divide the number of adults in groups by your average weekend adult attendance (example: 290 in groups divided by 450 average adult attendance = 64% connected). Check this number frequently. Whether or not your weekend adult attendance is increasing, your percent of connected adults should be going up. A flatlined percentage of people connected to small groups indicates that your small-group system is inadequately designed. The right design will produce growth in the percentage of people connected.

2. You have trouble finding enough leaders.

It's time to rethink your strategy for recruiting and training new leaders. In large churches, the problem is often in not casting the net wide enough to find new leaders. It's hard to know as many people personally as your church grows. You'll have to depend on new strategies for finding potential leaders.

The Host Model made famous by Saddleback Community Church does a great job of recruiting new leaders. This model, used in conjunction with a church-wide campaign, challenges church members to consider inviting a couple of friends to form a new small group for a sermon series. This doesn't mean you have to follow the Host Model or use a church-wide campaign, but you

need to find a method for finding leaders that works for your context, and you'll need to acknowledge the natural limits of your strategy.

3. You have trouble filling groups.

This is often an indication that there are too many options on the “belonging and becoming menu”. This is my term for all of the programs and activities offered in your church for connecting or spiritual growth (e.g., Sunday school, discipleship training, spiritual growth classes, small groups, etc.). With too many competing options, your small groups will suffer. Too many options on your belonging and becoming menu makes choosing the right next step too difficult. The best next steps are easy, obvious, and strategic (they only lead in the right direction).

On the other hand, this can be an indication that your congregation sees the weekend service as everything they need. In other words, they don't see the value of adding another church activity to their schedules.

In either case, it's important to determine and communicate which activities you want everyone in your church to be part of. For example, many churches want everyone to attend a worship service, participate in a small group, and serve in a ministry. If you're not casting that vision in a compelling way, it will be very common for adults to attend the weekend service and nothing more.

4. Your coaching structure isn't working.

That is, you either have coaches who aren't effective or you've tried to build a coaching structure and failed. We must remember: Whatever we want to happen in the lives of the members of our groups must first happen in the life of the leader.

This is why coaching is so important. The role of a coach is to do to and for and with small-group leaders whatever we want the leaders to do to and for and with their members. For example, if you want the members of your groups to know that their small-group leader is praying for them, leaders should have experienced it for themselves when their coach did this for them. If you want the small-group environment to be safe and nurturing, coaches must model this environment in their interactions with leaders.

Can you see what will happen if you have the wrong people serving as coaches? Can you see what will happen if you ask your coaches to do the wrong things? If your coaching structure isn't working, it's a sign that your overall ministry structure isn't working. You'll need to figure out how to help your coaching structure support your overall ministry goals.

5. Your senior pastor is reluctant to champion the ministry.

There are a number of reasons many senior pastors are reluctant champions. They often believe it's solely the role of the small-group pastor. Other times they simply see themselves only as a preacher and are reluctant to promote any one ministry, not wanting to leave anyone out. Both of these issues are things the pastor will have to work through.

On the other hand, sometimes they believe the system is ineffective or unreliable. If this is the case, you'll need to rethink your design. If you want to build a thriving small-group ministry, you must have the vocal support of the most influential person in the organization—your senior pastor. If you don't have it, you need to figure out why he or she is reluctant to support the ministry.

6. Your small groups aren't regularly producing disciples.

Small-group strategies that make it easy to connect but don't call people to more aren't designed to make disciples. These groups focus too much on belonging and not on becoming. On the other end of the spectrum, small-group strategies that focus only on knowledge and not on relationships won't produce disciples either. Small groups must offer both becoming and belonging.

7. Groups fall apart shortly after starting.

Lyman Coleman has noted that six weeks is short enough to make it easy to commit to a group and long enough for connection to begin forming. In my experience, helping new groups continue into a second six-week study makes them more sustaining groups where they experience deeper belonging and becoming. Groups that continue on to a third six-week study are nearly indestructible.

It's not enough simply to launch new groups. We must sustain them. If your system struggles to sustain new groups and grow the total number of groups and the total number of adults in groups, you have a bad design.

As Albert Einstein pointed out, to do the same thing again and again and expect different results is the definition of insanity. Want different results from your ministry? Change the design.

—Mark Howell is the founder of SmallGroupResources.net and the Pastor of Communities at Canyon Ridge Christian Church; copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Which of these signs do you see in your own ministry?
2. What might be the underlying causes of your ministry issues?
3. What is one change you'd like to make to your ministry structure to make it run more smoothly?

Further Exploration

Resources to help you develop a group strategy

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

- [Best Church Practices: Small-Group Ministry](#)
- [Become a Church of Groups](#)
- [Casting a Vision for Small Groups](#)
- [Create a Compelling Vision](#)
- [Market Your Small-Group Ministry](#)
- [Models Tool](#)
- [Re-Launching a Small-Groups Ministry](#)
- [Small-Group Director Orientation Guide](#)

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#). A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

[LeadershipJournal.net](#). A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[GiftedforLeadership.com](#). A website ministering to women leaders.

[Building a Life-Changing Small Group Ministry](#)

Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson
Zondervan, 2012

Navigate the process of establishing and developing group ministry in your context.

[Community Is Messy: The Perils and Promise of Small Group Ministry](#)

Heather Zempel
IVP Books, 2012

Discover fresh insights into supporting and maintaining authentic community.

[Making Small Groups Work](#)

Henry Cloud and John Townsend
Zondervan, 2010

Discover the key elements of healthy groups: grace plus truth plus time.