

## EMPOWERING GROUP MEMBERS

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Feeling uncertain but excited, I sat around the table with sixteen young people eager to be in a small group. I had responded to a request from some of the young *20 Somethings* who had asked for cross-generational leaders to lead a few of their small groups. I knew that these young people wanted spiritual mentoring, but I also knew the older, more spiritually mature leaders would benefit from the energy of the younger believers as well. Still, I wondered why I had put myself in this situation with a new group, all of whom were younger than my children, and none of whom I knew. We had no history other than my directing the church's small group ministry. This would be a challenge! How much easier it is to start a small group with at least a few people you know. On the flip side, what a wonderful challenge and opportunity it is to be part of a new group of young people eager to be challenged in their faith and anxious to explore just what it takes to lead a small group. With this in mind, I was excited and anxious to get to know this gathered, diverse group of young people, and for them to get to know one another.

In a newly formed group, it is always a wise idea to start with the process of self-disclosure, so I asked a very *safe* question, "Where did you grow up and what made that place interesting"? Surely everyone could answer that. Then we moved on to "How long have you lived in the Boston area"? "What brought you here"? Next I asked, "What one thing would you really like to see happen in this new small group, and what

would make this group worth your attending"? And so we began our journey. Eventually we named ourselves the "Awesome Group" and for our two years together, it was a perfect description.

### Designing a Covenant

If you want small group members to begin to feel safe and trusting, it is essential that a small group make decisions together about group life. Goals, format, meeting time, and study need to be agreed upon. Call it a contract or call it a covenant, but understand its implications as a promise and agreement between group members. Every group makes a covenant whether they realize it or not. Either it is an *assumed* covenant (or agreement) or a *negotiated* covenant. An assumed covenant develops when members have a particular idea of how the group will function during its time together without actually discussing the details.

The negotiated covenant, on the other hand, is one that has been thoroughly discussed and agreed upon by the participating members. This process minimizes the likelihood of disappointments due to unfulfilled assumptions. A negotiated covenant creates a healthy small group process and should be a top priority in forming a group. Empowerment and ownership develops when group members help to form the covenant with their yearnings and expectations.

Covenant issues include time, day, attendance, participations, confidentiality,

hospitality, availability outside group, preparation and other considerations that might be on a member's mind. People feel more comfortable when they know "what is in and what is out!"

### Creating effective discussion

Asking a good question is the key to creating meaningful discussion. It assists in the self-disclosure aspect of group life and eventually becomes a powerful tool for accountability and ownership of the group. Well-constructed questions help the members of the group discover biblical truths for themselves. It is therefore important that the leader cultivate the ability to ask the right question at the appropriate time. These questions become the springboard for discussion and help the group members make new discoveries about the Scripture and the implications for life and practice in the Christian faith.

As small groups provide excellent support in times of crisis, change and stress, it is important for the leader to create a safe environment where telling stories and exploring difficult times are central to spiritual growth. Leaders empower members when they have a sense of stability and security knowing that there are people who really care for you and are committed to standing with you; that in fact they have experienced similar experiences and are anxious to hear about yours. Often you hear stories of small group members testifying that they never would have made it through a difficult situation had it not been for their caring and praying small group friends.

In order to create a healthy environment for deeper sharing, there are various types of questions that should be included in your group discussion. When constructing effective questions, it is essential for the leader to understand the important stages of growth each group can and should experience, as an effective

question becomes the tool that drives the group through these differing stages. There are basically four stages a group may experience. First is the *forming* stage where members test the waters for trust and confidentiality. History questions are safe for this stage. For instance, the above examples of sharing questions I asked my new small group are appropriate, simple, and safe questions that begin the *getting to know you* process of the small group experience.

The second stage is often referred to as the *storming* stage as members become more comfortable and challenged in their faith. A bit of conflict is normal for this stage as comfort in disagreement or wanting more leadership should develop. Effective questions involve present situations such as "what is a challenge you are facing this week? In what way can we pray for you?"

The third stage is often called *norming* where members are more open to truth telling and taking the mask of the false self off. Present and future questions have been used to reach this stage. For instance, you might ask a future question such as "where do you want to be spiritually this time next year? What spiritual discipline might be one way to achieve this yearning?"

The final stage is often referred to as the *performing* stage. The group is mature and comfortable being challenged in their faith and practice. It's a wonderful experience to be in this stage yet if the group continues on for too long, it lacks freshness and becomes routine. This is a perfect stage to encourage and empower one or more members to consider forming their own group. It becomes a stage for leadership development.

If leaders are not intentionally designing questions to move members into the different stages, the group settles into a superficial interaction that is hard to change. Unfortunately most groups function at the forming or superficial level where spiritual formation and growth is not evident. Head knowledge might be

increased, but what I like to call “blending belief and behavior” with accountability does not happen.

### **Recognizing spiritual gifts**

As a group begins to know, love, serve and celebrate one another, trust levels rise. Comfort and risk seem to be present at the same moment. An attentive leader will recognize the potential gifts present within the group. Affirming group members that God delights in giving spiritual gifts creates opportunities for not only suggesting a role for someone, it allows moments where members can confirm and affirm what they notice in their spiritual friends! For instance, when you sense a member is yearning for worship and prayer within the group, empower this group member by delegating the prayer time into his or her responsibility. The leader does not have to lead every component of the group life and certainly should not be threatened by a rising potential leader. You may want to guide the group member with a few suggestions in various types of prayer or worship yet it is essential to “let go” and allow the person to lead as he or she feels God is directing. It may not be the way you would do it; it might be better! You have just encouraged a person to take a risk, use a gift and the sense of ownership in the group is increasing.

The group opening is another opportunity to encourage group members to use their creativity in leading. For instance, I will often start a small group with a lectio reading; sacred or reflective reading of Scripture. If the text is central to the theme or particular study, this quiets the group and centers their thoughts on the upcoming discussion. It also gives the group members opportunity to share deep thoughts and invitations they sense from God. This is powerful in bonding and creating a sense of ownership of the small group.

Leading the discussion or breaking into smaller groups and using group members to lead not only empowers group members but becomes a strategic tool for leadership development. Other gifts such as hospitality responsibilities or contacting those who missed the small group meeting to bring them up to date become important acts of creating strong ownership and a willingness to preserve the quality of group life.

Being observant of those with leadership skills and desires should be recognized as potential leaders and for multiplying the small group ministry. Unfortunately often this development becomes a threat to a leader. Recognize potential leadership; invite the member to lead a meeting and express your desire to have this person as a co-leader or apprentice and share responsibilities.

Utilizing intentional empowerment and ownership in a small group of people who yearn to know God in a deeper and personal way and who desire to grow spiritually with one another is an amazing experience! When small groups are grounded in prayer and proper preparation, when they are well facilitated allowing ownership and high trust levels to develop, and when the members experience meaningful community, care and connection with God and one another, spiritual growth becomes evident, life-change happens, and strong disciples for Jesus Christ are developed.

Be intentional about your small group leadership role. Strive to create healthy environments where members feel comfortable, accepted and empowered. Commit to excellence, be well prepared, encourage and care for your members, and watch the Holy Spirit do the changing!