

EMPOWERING GROUP MEMBERS CASE STUDY

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Published at SmallGroups.com, February 2012

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. Our church was very large for New England (2400) and situated centrally in Boston MA near many graduate schools. Our number of young people grew significantly with small group offerings. I knew that these young people wanted spiritual mentoring, but I also knew the older, more spiritually mature leaders would not only benefit from the energy of the younger believers, but be encouraged with their young faith and enthusiasm of practical theology. 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"? Along with some of the common responses to that question, three people answered that they would like to meet someone they might marry! And so we began our journey. Eventually we named ourselves the "Awesome Group" and for our two years together, it was a perfect description.

Problem: Same group too long and superficial sharing

The eventual problem with this group was their wanting to stay together as the same group for too long. Many groups boast of how long they have been meeting and a large percentage of these groups are usually very superficial. If the group begins safe and superficial

without attempting to encourage the group into a new deeper stage of sharing, there seems to be a point of no return in creating a more trusting, truth-giving environment. People become cautious of what they are willing to share and often comfort becomes the norm for group life.

The start and the end of a small group is one very important foundational step a leader can implement for healthy group process. It is therefore necessary to have in place some sort of covenant so all members will be aware of what is “in” and what is “out” during the life of the group. It is helpful if members know they do not have to be part of a particular small group “forever.” In the case of this new small group I started, the duration implied was the fall season and evaluation in mid- December making decisions about who would continue or not. This is important for creating freedom for members to switch to another group should they wish without the feeling of guilt.

As a group we met every week until the Christmas break. During the discussion about our future, everyone was adamant about staying together throughout the spring. At the end of the spring we all should have been prepared to multiply the group and move on. However, a couple of the young women burst into the tears and everyone wanted to stay together once/month during the summer and then weekly when the fall semester started again. I agreed.

As a reminder, this group had sixteen members plus myself. Too large. I was sure some would drop out, but no one did. In fact we almost always had perfect attendance! We studied hard, shared our lives (at least

the part that was safe) and did fun activities a few times outside the weekly group gathering. Using the strategy I suggest to others, I attempted to break the group into smaller groups for prayer or for the Scripture discussion, but they would have no part in my idea. It was becoming clear that we were not going very deep; women afraid to take off the mask and men careful not to be too vulnerable. As we approached the end of the spring semester, I began to mention that we had “x” numbers of weeks left and I wanted them thinking about what their future group might be and look like. Panic struck their faces each time!

The day came, and sensing I was getting nowhere with my gentle suggestions, I journeyed into my usual: planning people’s lives for them! Since we had openly discussed the duration of the group and had decided upon an ending time, the young men and women were better prepared to experience the termination of the group life together. I had encouraged several of the members to consider leading a group of their own as I sensed the ability and the maturity to do just that. To one young man I suggested he start a group at MIT where he was a graduate student. To two other young men, I suggested they start a new group together with the *20 Somethings*, and the remaining two men thought of groups they would like to join. One was leaving Boston. There. Now I had just young women. To one I suggested she start a new group for young women as I sensed she was feeling called and confident; to the other nine, I agreed to meet for one more year with one condition; that the “Awesome” group be vulnerable in a deeper way and that all prayer would center

on personal situations and needs. No more prayer for “my friend in CA” or “Aunt Tilly” down the road. We were going to do some serious soul care. They agreed. We celebrated the two years together and covenanted to pray for one another during the transition and new group life they would experience. I sensed everyone felt secure and excited in their new and growing roles.

Over the past two years, the Awesome Group was a wonderful time for me; I loved being their leader. However, I sensed that we were headed into a fun but spiritually stagnant year and as a leader I had to make a hard decision. What was developing in this awesome group became clear to all. They had become good friends, enjoyed being together, but the sharing was superficial and the need to impress their peers encouraged wearing masks suppressing truth. As a minister, leader, friend and “adopted Mom,” I probably failed to get us deeper when I had the chance.

In the two years I met with this group, I noticed leadership qualities and depth in a few of the members that was not being tapped into. I shared leadership with them, times of prayer and used them to help make plans for outreach. It was obvious to me that after two years in the same group, new and fresh interactions were necessary.

There was fear and trembling with starting up the new groups in the fall, but with their leadership training and my assistance, they flourished and shortly didn’t need me at all. No one felt “kicked out” and each felt a particular call from God to journey into new territory. Victory!

With the nine women who remained in the group, we began sharing spiritual autobiographies. What deep, interesting and challenging journeys we heard! Again it was amazing all the new information we gathered in this accountability group! Describing the state of their soul each week led to intimate prayer and deep transformation. The fact that the group agreed to inform one another what God was doing in and through them verses friends and the world created a yearning to listen better and go deeper in their spiritual formation. The group matured significantly during this third year. It became a difficult year for several with losses and grieving. The closeness of each member to one another was striking and encouraging. It would have not been so in the large group of seventeen. At the end of the year we disbanded as a small group but continued to meet together for a meal and for catching up moments. And to this day we refer to each other as members of the awesome group! And by the way, I did marry off three couples from the original group!