

Build Your Team

Identify the key roles your small-group ministry team needs.

M. Scott Boren

God is the God of eternal conversation. The Father, Son, and Spirit live the story of who God is through dialogue. Life and love are found in the midst of such interaction, resulting in mutual understanding and self-sacrifice for the other. The success of small groups doesn't occur just because ten people gather weekly for a meeting—success takes deliberate strategy while making use of multiple gift sets and leadership talents.

The story of the way of Jesus in small groups is a result of the flow of the dialogue of God into and through the people in the groups. We could use words like community, shared leadership, collaboration, family, and teamwork to describe this life of mutual experience—where individuals tear down the walls dividing them and make space for the Spirit to live into the divine life.

In many cases, the stories told by our groups are limited by the stories told by the leaders overseeing those groups. For instance, if the small-group point person works in isolation and does not collaborate with others, the small-group leaders will do the same. If the pastor works with a team to lead the church, practicing shared leadership, transparency, and delegation, then small-group leaders will more likely lead their groups in community, adopting the leadership style they are taught.

The difficulty is many pastors have been trained to lead in isolation. A pastor learns of the concept of small groups through a conference or book. He or she feels God's leading to move in that direction. He enters his study to develop a strategy, which he subsequently presents to his leaders. Much to his surprise, the leaders respond less than favorably.

Even when church leaders consent to the small group vision presented by their pastor, implementing the vision can be challenging without collaboration from the leaders. The issues related to leading people into small-group life are too complex for one person to recognize and evaluate.

Different kinds of leaders with different kinds of gifts are necessary to ensure the correct issues are recognized, spiritually discerned, and acted upon. Likewise, most pastors do not have the time to give to group development, being called to lead the entire church, prepare sermons, and provide direction for people not yet in small groups.

When multiple people with a singular focus contribute to a vision and strategy, the rest of the church will be more likely to trust its validity. Churches with the most effective small-group systems have developed teams to work with those small groups. In some churches, the team formation was deliberate, while in others it was an informal accident.

Building the Right Kind of Team

The team should be no smaller than three people—any fewer would not make a team. The team should be no larger than seven—any more makes it difficult to manage. Those selected should be people who enjoy working “on” a project, as opposed to “in” a project.

The difference is significant. “On” people like to discover possibilities and search out boundaries of what could be. They see the whole perspective of the project and are good at providing the guidance to the entire system. “In” people like to work within the project. They are hands-on and enjoy the action. “In” people get frustrated when the “on” people begin to discuss ideas, concepts, and vision—they only want to know what the finished project will look like, and what they are supposed to do. If “in” people are recruited for your small-group team, the process will prove very frustrating.

During a presentation on group strategy, I noticed the dismay of an older couple named Ned and Nancy. They expressed frustration because they couldn’t catch the vision in the way their pastor had hoped. Even though the pastor had presented the vision for over three years, they couldn’t get their minds around it. At the same time, this couple led a very effective small group. They practiced all the ministry habits of good group leaders. They were happy to lead at that level, but didn’t concern themselves with

big-picture questions of theology, vision, training, or strategy, being much more concerned with actually caring for the people and doing the work of ministry.

On the other hand, during that same training, there were four others who couldn't get enough information about the intricacies of the group strategy. Even after the conference, they bombarded me with questions.

Even though people like Ned and Nancy have served as faithful leaders in the church for years, it doesn't mean they have the ability—or desire—to strategize and *lead* the charge into the future. During the seminar with Ned and Nancy, I explained how people who don't thrive on big-picture questions of vision and strategy need not concern themselves with *trying* to understand it. They only need to see their role in the strategy, and follow God in it. Immediately, Ned and Nancy breathed sighs of relief.

Ned and Nancy were frustrated because they were being asked to participate in the small-group team as strategists, even though they don't think like “on” persons. They are leaders in their church, respected ministers who love people, pray for people, and serve as pillars of faith for others to follow. People like Ned and Nancy are “in” people, preferring to focus their energy working *inside* the vision—not working *on* the vision. Church leaders need to determine if they're an “in” or an “on” person. Here are some things to consider:

- Broad knowledge about, or a desire to learn about, what's happening in the church.
- Credibility, connections, and stature within the church.
- Understanding of the internal workings of the church.
- Formal authority and managerial skills needed to plan, organize, and oversee the process of implementing groups.
- Leadership skills for developing vision, communicating that vision, and motivating people to enter that vision.

- Commitment to daily prayer and hearing God's direction.
- Hunger to see biblical community developed in the church through groups.
- Availability to work on the team.

Team Composition

Small-Group Point Person

Let's get practical by addressing some of the issues regarding the composition of this team. First, consider the role of the small-group point leader, the vision champion for group life. In larger churches, this role will be taken on by a staff pastor. In smaller congregations, this will be fulfilled by either the senior pastor or by a volunteer. Understandably, the larger the church, the larger percentage of time will be invested in this aspect of the work.

The role of the small-group point person calls for three perspectives. The first perspective entails overseeing the development of the group ministry's vision and strategy. The second perspective is that of a shepherd who does the mundane, repetitive work of caring for the sheep. The third perspective is that of administering the details. Too often, the point person's job turns into that of a program administrator—tracking growth, running budgets, organizing curriculum, managing the small-group calendar, and reading reports. They may know how to administer the details involved in running the group program, but this doesn't allow for time to invest in group life—develop new leaders, share life with multiple groups in an area, deal with group conflict, or eat meals with people under their care. They don't feed the sheep.

A great way to determine if this is happening is to evaluate how much time the point person is doing his or her job from the church office. The work of shepherding groups and leaders happens out in life, not inside the church building.

We tend to hire program administrators to run the small-group ministry, much like we hired Sunday school administrators to run the adult education programs of past decades. Instead, we need to empower pastors who are gifted shepherds to do the routine, repetitive work of effectively caring for sheep. Effective group pastors possess strengths that allow them to focus their energies on caring for people, developing leaders, and gathering people around a vision.

For the administrative tasks that need to be done, enlist help. Don't get focused on all those details at the expense of vision and shepherding. I've seen point people spend hours sitting in the office trying to figure out group management software, ordering curriculum, attending endless meetings, and typesetting brochures. Those are all necessary, but if the passion of the point person is that of vision and shepherding—as it should be—those tasks that are more administrative in nature are not duties he or she likely does well.

Senior Pastor

In some cases, the senior pastor will play the role of the point person. However, when this is the case, he or she can only take on the vision part of this role. There is just not enough time in the week to do the work of the senior pastor, while at the same time doing the shepherding and administration. He or she will need help from the team to fulfill those roles.

The skills needed to preach, lead the various aspects of church life, and work with the different departments of a church are different than the skills needed to shepherd groups. Many senior pastors don't have the gift set for recruiting and training leaders to oversee groups and develop group leaders. In fact, the best small-group point people aren't necessarily great preachers.

In the situations where groups have been most effective, the senior pastor does not assume the role of the groups point person. At the same time, the relationship between the senior pastor and the groups point person is crucial. The senior pastor and the small-group point person work together,

and as a result, the senior pastor carries the vision, talks about groups, and teaches about group principles.

Let's briefly look at a few marks of lead pastors who are compelled by this vision:

- They own the vision for groups—most likely they are not the primary point persons of the small group ministry, but they promote it more than anyone else.
- They participate in group life, and speak from their experience.
- They understand the strategy of the group life team, participating with the team at appropriate times so that they are doing more than just serving as the promoter.
- They lead relationally—they are involved in the lives of the leaders with whom they directly work, know them beyond their jobs, and minister to them as a shepherd.
- They work with other leaders as a team, shedding the expectation they have to be the super-star leader with all the gifts. Instead, they have found leaders with strengths and gifts that complement their own. In this setting, they have learned to defer to others who have insight and gifts in areas they do not.

Signs of a Good Fit

When considering those who would be effective members of this team, including any volunteers you may ask to join, consider the following:

Position Power: Are enough key players on board, especially key leaders, so that effective progress can be made?

Expertise: Is diversity of thought represented to allow informed, intelligent decisions to be made?

Credibility: Does the group consist of a sufficient number of people with solid reputations so its proposals will be taken seriously by others?

Leadership: Does the group include enough proven leaders to be able to facilitate the change process?

Humility: Do the group members demonstrate the ability to submit to one another?

Availability: Do the members have the available time to commit to this process?

Aptitude: Do the members have a propensity to work on the small-group ministry, and think critically about the big picture strategy and future development?

Prayer Life: Do the members have a passionate prayer life, and love for God?

The Difference a Team Makes

Just as there are no perfect people, there are no perfect teams. You might think leading the small-group ministry in your church is easier to do by yourself—and you might be correct. The goal, however, is not efficiency or productivity. The goal of this team is to make space with one another so that God can form you as leaders to be the kinds of people who have the character of community and mission, causing your groups to flourish. Working together as a team to oversee groups is not merely about developing a strategy. While strategy development is part of it, we cannot miss the fact God is using your team to shape you to be the kind of people who can model God's way of leading for others to follow. After all, people follow what they observe, not what they are told.

—Scott Boren is the author of several books. This article is an excerpt from *Grouping the Church in the Way of Jesus*. Secure your free e-book copy today: www.mscottboren.org/books.