

Set Leaders Free

What it takes to let leaders lead

Trevor Lee

Note: This article is excerpted from our Training Tool [Empower Small-Group Leaders](#).

We all have high hopes for our small groups. We want to see people growing closer to God and each other. We want to see this growth translate into the fruit of character, good works, and new people coming to faith in Jesus. Unfortunately, our desire for change and growth doesn't mean we'll see them.

While there are many factors that contribute to healthy and impactful groups, one key is having capable leaders who are given the freedom to lead. Conversely, one thing sure to stifle group health and impact is micro-managing a leader. Real leaders want to lead. When they're merely puppets, they'll become frustrated and irritated. When leaders are micromanaged, your ministry's most effective leaders will quit taking leadership positions.

To create an environment where leaders are given the freedom to lead *and* leaders are aligned with the mission of the church, coaches and staff must do four essential things.

Be clear about the things that are important for your church.

Creating an environment where leaders are given the freedom to lead begins long before they start leading a group. However your church has communicated what's truly important (whether you call it your mission, purpose, or DNA), you should communicate it so well that everyone in the church understands—not just your leaders. Then by the time people are ready to lead, they already understand what your church is about, and their group members have the same understanding without any additional teaching.

It's not enough, though, simply to communicate what your church is about. You need to make sure that people moving toward leadership are, in fact, aligned with your church. You don't have to give them a multiple-choice test, but you should at least have a conversation that clarifies their understanding and agreement with the core values of the church.

You'll never feel comfortable giving away leadership to someone unless you believe you're on the same page. A basketball coach wouldn't put a player on the court who couldn't articulate the play. In the same way, we can't put people into leadership positions if they can't articulate how our church has chosen to pursue the mission of Jesus together. When you're confident someone understands this and is prepared to lead within your church's framework, it becomes much easier to let them lead.

Have a good method for selecting and training leaders.

At our church, this process is pretty organic. We don't have a 10-step process for leadership selection, but we have identified characteristics we look for in small-group leaders.

Depending on the ethos of your church, this process may look like a series of conversations or a leadership class people need to complete. There is no one right way to select and train leaders, but there is a wrong way. Here's what the wrong way looks like:

"Hey, small groups start up in two weeks and we need to offer a couple more groups."

"Okay, umm, what should we do?"

"Well, I just thought we could make an announcement on Sunday and see if anyone volunteers. If they don't, we could call people until we find someone."

Your small groups are too important to throw just anyone into leadership! In a smaller church like ours, we can pretty easily watch people's behavior and get a good idea of who would be capable of leading. We also identify people who aren't prepared to lead right now but show many characteristics that would make them good leaders in the future. Then someone from our Leadership Team intentionally connects with them to help them develop. Larger churches may need a more delineated process for identifying and developing future leaders.

When you're confident in a person's character and abilities, it frees you to take your hands off and let them lead. On the flipside, if you believe a leader is untrustworthy or incompetent you will naturally be looking over his or her shoulder.

Check in with your leaders and approach them with the intention of learning.

It's important that you stay in touch with your leaders. They need to know you care about what's happening. It's most natural for you to set the agenda, get the feedback you want, and disseminate information. But what if your primary agenda were to learn from them? A great way to do this is to ask questions. The point of these questions is to spur thought in your leaders and to genuinely learn from their experiences and ideas. You can't fake a desire to learn from them; most leaders will sniff that out. So check your motives and strive to actually approach your leaders as a learner. Here are some good questions that will put you in the place of a learner:

- What is the best thing that happened in your small group in the last month? Why do you think that happened?
- What has been effective for accomplishing the purposes you're pursuing? Do you think those things would be effective in other small groups?
- Are there things that are frustrating you right now? Why? How are you thinking of addressing those issues?
- What new ideas are you thinking about that you haven't tried yet?

- How are you developing new leaders? What's working?

Have clear, easy, and effective means of evaluation.

Part of the job of the person overseeing small groups is to evaluate them and make sure they are healthy and effective. Evaluation and micromanagement are not the same thing. Micromanagement is a means of stripping leaders of power while good evaluation empowers leaders by giving them the ability to see how they're succeeding and where they can grow. Evaluation also gives you a natural opportunity to make sure everyone is still in alignment with your church.

At our church we constantly say we want people to move "up" in relationship with God, "in" in community with other followers of Jesus, and "out" in God's holistic mission of restoration. So to evaluate a small group, we ask the leader to share how the group is doing in each of those areas. And when we ask, we're not looking for a simple response like "good." We're looking for stories, examples, and measurements that illustrate how things are going in each direction. When a leader is unable to point to any type of success in one of the three directions, we seldom even have to challenge them to adjust what they're doing. Good leaders naturally see the deficiencies that exist and begin thinking about how to change to address these deficiencies. Then, the next time we get together we're able to see if there was growth and change in these three directions.

When leaders are aligned with the church, evaluation simply becomes a time to help them see how they're fulfilling that shared mission. Rather than see you as looking over their shoulder, leaders will see you as empowering them to live out the mission they've already bought into. This type of evaluation will allow you to give your leaders freedom because you know they're working in the same direction as the rest of the church.

—Trevor Lee is the Lead Pastor of Trailhead Church in Littleton, Colorado; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. What is your current process for identifying and training new leaders? Are you happy with it, or does it need adjusting? Why?
2. How often do you approach your leaders as a learner?
3. How clearly are your church's values communicated? How do you use these values as a way to evaluate leaders?

© 2019 Christianity Today - a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.