

Hints for Training Growth Group leaders

It is clear that one of the key challenges for pastors is how they equip lay leaders – particularly lay leaders of Growth groups / Small groups. The following is a short prompt to assist pastors to consider some of the methods or processes they might use to disciple, equip or train growth group leaders.

Didactic Training

Didactic teaching involves teaching in a more lecture-based or presentation based approach and is useful for the teaching of factual information. This approach places the trainer in the position of expert / teacher and trainees as acquirers of the teacher's knowledge, skills and experience. Didactic training is useful for proving people with content and equipping people to know what is expected, however it is a poor tool for building capabilities and skills. It is a pity that most training and equipping of growth group leaders falls into this area.

Workshop Training

From an adult learning perspective, participation is often more effective at reinforcing principles and ideas.

Workshop training might typically involve enlisting trainees to consider or think through problems or situations on their own, in pairs or in groups. By considering problems or solutions in a shared manner, participants are able to 'discover' solutions using the shared ideas, skills and experiences of those working together. This is more likely to encourage shared learning and involvement in decision making process. Workshops are a wonderful (and simple) tool to encourage brainstorming, to create and interrogate options, to consider possible outcomes or outputs, and can help to create shared ownership and 'buy in' for the agreed way forward.

Role plays can also be extraordinarily valuable in developing skills and encouraging participants to explore outside of their comfort zones – importantly, in a safe environment. Often missed with role plays is the opportunity for participants to observe what another person does - giving them insights into how their approach is "received" and providing opportunity to copy or emulate skills or methods that they can relate to.

1:1 Discipleship / Coaching

Meeting 1:1 permits the ideal opportunity to discuss the personal situation of the leader and encourage them to grow in their faith. It provides terrific opportunity to model personal devotion, shared prayer and personal accountability. 1:1 provides wonderful opportunity to explore in depth how members of the leader's group are progressing in their faith. Clearly regular 1:1 meetings are the most effective tool for intimate discussions and for higher levels of accountability and personal support.

NB. 1:1 coaching of growth group leaders could follow direct observation (eg sitting in on a growth group meeting) or may occur without observation (meaning the coach would ask reflective questions of the growth group leader). (see CMD unit on coaching).

The greatest challenge with 1:1 meetings is the amount of time that this takes. Very few pastors have the capacity to meet with all leaders and to do so would either dominate too much time or mean that meetings are too irregular to be meaningful. Churches that use 1:1 meetings well typically establish an organisational structure whereby lay leaders / elders are authorised as leaders of leaders.

Leadership Clusters

Leadership clusters might involve bringing together a small group of growth group leaders (eg 3-8 people) on a regular basis to build a safe environment for learning, discussion and accountability. Leadership clusters are wonderful for sharing experiences, didactic learning, role playing and building accountability amongst leadership peers. They also create an efficient way of meeting regularly with leaders when it is difficult to meet 1:1 with leaders. Many secular organisations recognise that 1:1 and cluster meetings are useful in tandem. Whilst 1:1 meetings are far more effective for personal coaching and intervention, the peer coaching associated with clusters is more effective for group pastoral support, sharing examples / stories, mutual encouragement and creating a shared learning environment.

Leadership clusters are a terrific vehicle for building shared momentum across groups – ie keeping a focus on the ongoing growth of individuals and groups, and their actions. To do this it can be very helpful to agree to certain priorities amongst leaders for implementation whilst gaining a commitment to follow up and assess how things have gone at the next meeting. Peer group accountability is a very strong tool when mutual accountability is established.

On the Job

The best training environment for growth groups is on the job yet it seems very few churches have established an approach that enables leaders to be regularly observed in situ followed by coaching and review. An effective coaching tool is to sit in on the group and observe the group (without taking over) watching carefully how the leader does their job. Following the meeting (or within the week) conduct a review to reflect on how the leader went. It is very important that this reflection and coaching is done with care (see CMD unit on coaching) seeking to help the leader identify:

- What they are doing well
- A couple of areas only that they could improve upon
- And then agree to follow up (with observation) at a date in the near future.

NB - When observing a leader in a group it is important to consider the message you wish to send to the group. How you behave and what you do send implicit or explicit messages to the group. Examples include:

- If you do the study whenever you are there you might be sending the message:
 - the group doesn't have the best leader because you are not their leader. At best they have the 2nd best leader! (this behaviour may undermine the leader).
 - to lead a study you have to be as equipped as you are (ie Theological College trained / expert in Ancient Greek etc).
- If you take the hard questions or indeed answer all the questions, instead of the nominated leader, you again may be reinforcing your superiority at the expense of the leader.
- I suggest that the messages you want to send to the group through your behaviour might include:
 - "I fully support this leader and I am really happy that they are your leader"
 - "I value this leader so much that I am here to equip and train them" / "We take small group leader seriously at this church – so seriously that I am here to observe and train this leader".
 - "It is OK for the leader to make mistakes in front of me"
 - "I care so much for this group that I want you to have the best leader that you can have"
 - "Anyone can learn how to read the bible" (ie you don't have to go to bible college or study Ancient Greek or Ancient Hebrew to access God's Word)
- Tips to achieve this
 - Notify the group that you are here to be with them and to support and train the leader. You want to observe and listen.
 - When the leader is speaking look at them. Direct attention to them with your eyes and body language. (You are interested (and fully support) what they have to say).
 - When asked a question pass it on to the leader to answer. You are confident in this leader.
 - Hold your opinion as much as possible – observe and then feedback to the leader after the meeting / at the review.
 - Agree to share some information about the broader church or team at the meeting. That is, play a role in the meeting that is unique to your specific role – updates, information, strategy / mission – which means that your visit is adding value to the group however you are not taking over something the leader could have done.
- There may be times when modelling is important (demonstrating). Whilst this is helpful it must be recognised that doing this often reinforces your superiority / self-confidence as opposed to your confidence in the leader