

Healthy Ministries Provide Ongoing Training

Your leaders need more than just start-up training.

Seth Widner

During my college days, a friend asked me to help him with one of his class assignments. His assignment was to visit a local private school and teach a creative object lesson to students. His lesson would be recorded and turned in to his professor. My role was to be his cameraman.

As we drove to the school, my friend explained that the assignment would count as a third of his grade, so it was important for him to do well. He was confident because he'd put together a great visual illustration: magic tricks.

"Children love magic tricks," he confidently explained.

We soon arrived at our destination and were led to the school auditorium. My friend got everything ready for dazzling the students, and I found a good spot for the camera. After a few minutes, the principal came in and reviewed the time frame for teaching, and then the students filed in.

We were shocked. Rather than the little boys and girls we expected, teenagers found their seats in the auditorium. My friend quickly approached the principal to see why these students were much older than expected. There had been a miscommunication during scheduling. Confused, my friend wondered aloud, "What do I do now?" The principal insisted that he continue with his lesson, and my friend reluctantly agreed.

The auditorium was filled with awkward silence. The students sensed that something wasn't quite right. My friend stuttered and stammered his way through each magic trick. The students weren't impressed, and they rolled their eyes. My friend lost confidence with each new trick, and it clearly showed.

As the students exited the auditorium, I burst out laughing at the craziness of the situation. Luckily, my friend could see the humor in the situation as well, and we shared a chuckle.

My friend spent a lot of time preparing for his presentation. He had learned many creative teaching methods from his college course. The problem wasn't the content of his lesson. In fact, I am confident that first graders would have enjoyed the magic tricks. The problem was that my friend was thrown an unexpected curveball.

Addressing Curveballs

Sometimes small-group leaders are thrown curveballs as well. They may attend small-group training as a new leader, gaining valuable techniques and tools for leading their group. They may even walk into their first group meeting confident in their skills. But it's only a matter of time before a leader is thrown a curveball of some kind: being asked difficult theological questions, facing relational conflict among group members, or needing to offer comfort to a depressed member. These unplanned situations can be extremely intimidating to a small-group leader.

No matter how effective a church's start-up training may be, it's impossible to fully equip a small-group leader for everything he or she may face. Why? Small-group ministry involves people, and people are unpredictable. As leaders get to know group members on a deeper level, needs and questions will arise, and personality quirks will come out. It's impossible to fully prepare leaders for everything that they may face. They need more than start-up training. In fact, leaders need three kinds of training to be successful.

Start-Up Training

This is the initial training that all small-group leaders walk through before they can lead a group. Although it can't cover everything, leaders need this base of training to be successful. Effective start-up training serves as an orientation to your church's small-group ministry and equips leaders to launch small groups. It should carry them through the first few months of a

new group, giving them the basics of leading and facilitating. Although start-up training will be unique to each ministry, it should answer the following kinds of questions:

- How does my group accomplish the overall vision of the church?
- When, where, and for how long will my group meet?
- Who will be in my group (e.g., singles, teenagers, women)?
- How will I gain members?
- What will my group study, discuss, or do together?
- What is expected of me as a leader?
- What are some basic skills for facilitating meaningful discussions?
- Who am I to contact if problems arise?

One-on-One Training

This training equips leaders to handle anything that arises that wasn't covered in the start-up training. Leaders must have a coach or small-group pastor who can guide them when they face obstacles in their leadership, especially those specific to their group. One-on-one training is great because coaches can address issues that are specific to a single leader rather than address every single possible issue with all leaders. It would be a waste of time to cover training that is irrelevant to the overall team at a training event. Providing one-on-one coaching also allows leaders to ask as many questions as they need so they are fully equipped. Additionally, this allows leaders to address more personal issues without all other leaders knowing the details of the issue.

All-Leader Training

As you provide the previous two types of training, you will learn the kinds of obstacles multiple leaders are facing. When you see patterns in the needs of your leaders, consider doing a training event for all of your leaders on the issue. Whether it's a special event, or it's training that's part of your regular leader meetings, addressing common issues that weren't covered in start-up training is helpful to everyone. For instance, if several leaders are dealing with how to choose a study, your next leader meeting

could focus on how to find a good study for your group. You could even have leaders share with one another about how they've chosen studies in the past. Regardless of experience, all small-group leaders can gain new insight about common issues. We will never become leaders who know it all. Rather, we can all gain new wisdom, especially from one another. Small-group leadership training must be viewed as a marathon rather than a sprint. Instead of limiting training to a single series or event, harness multiple opportunities to train leaders in both specific aspects of their leadership and general best practices. By incorporating these three types of training, you'll provide ample support for your leaders. Your leaders will be equipped to effectively handle their leadership issues.

—Seth Widner served as the small-group pastor of The Journey church and is the founder of i58revolution, an organization that supports healthy families; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

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