

8 Key Practices for Effective Small Group Leaders

By Greg Bowman, adapted from
“8 Key Practices for Effective Small Group Leaders”
breakout session at Willow Creek
Small Groups Conference

All small groups look different, but there are several practices that guide effective groups. Learn what these practices are and how to use them to your group’s advantage.

Goal:

For small group leaders to discover ways to be effective and grow in proficiency while implementing the key practices of small group leadership.



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How to use "8 Key Practices for Effective Small Group Leaders"

The following materials can be used for either personal or group training to increase the effectiveness of small groups.

Training Others

If you use this material to train other small group leaders, you may want to modify the handouts as necessary. Personalize them by printing on church letterhead or adding your church logo to the design. Each handout can be used in separate, brief training sessions, or you can combine all of the material into one session.

Read through the materials and any listed Scriptures ahead of time. Then prepare the materials as needed:

- Make enough copies for all of the participants.
- Provide food, drink, and other materials that will make your training sessions more comfortable.

Allow five minutes for everyone to read through each handout. Then discuss the questions provided, or consider questions such as:

- "Why are these principles important for a successful small group?"
- "How well does your small group currently incorporate these principles?"
- "What one or two practical things could we do in the next year to improve in this area?"

Pray

Ask God to give you wisdom as you contemplate the leadership development of your small group ministry.

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Four Purposes of Small Groups

Discover four biblical principles that drive small group ministry.

Philippians 2:2

Think for a moment about the purposes of your small group ministry. Do you know what they are? Are they valid purposes? Does your ministry even have set purposes? Before we talk about what small group leaders need to do for success, we have to figure out what we want groups to do. Once you know the purposes of the group, the leaders can be trained to accomplish those purposes.

What if you could start all over again—would you base your small group ministry around the same purposes? Gather together with two or three others and brainstorm for a few minutes. Imagine that today you could wipe the slate clean—start over in your small group ministry. What would the purposes of a small group be?

You probably came up with several valid, biblical purposes of small groups. Take a look at the following purposes and see if all of your answers fit into one of these four categories.

Transformation

“Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” 1 John 2:6

Transformation = growing in mutual accountability, in mutual submission, and in the application of scriptural truth, so that seekers and believers become more like Jesus in attitude and behavior.

Community

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:24–25

Community = creating an environment characterized by authenticity and transparency so that seekers and believers enter into relationships where they are known, loved, accepted, and challenged.

Note: Did you notice we said both believers *and* seekers? Yes, seekers are an important part of small groups. They keep the believers honest and will enrich the community by challenging boundaries and comfort zones. (For more information on including seekers in small groups, check out our “Mix It Up: Combining Seekers, Strays, and Believers in One Group” training download.)

Compassion

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” 2 Corinthians 1:3–4

Compassion = encouraging group members to grow in love for others so that seekers and believers embrace and serve people in and beyond their small group.

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HANDOUT #1

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Mission

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” Matthew 9:37–38

Mission = building a community with an eternal perspective so that each small group member actively invests in kingdom work.

Your Church

The purposes you choose for your church’s small groups do not have to look exactly like these four. The concern is not so much which purposes you choose as it is that you make sure you understand the purpose of your groups and that you communicate clearly what you want your leaders to do.

Discuss

- Does your church need to rethink the purposes of your small groups? Why or why not?
- Does your church’s focus on community in small groups fit the biblical model of “spurring one another on toward love and good deeds”? If not, what do you need to do to get there?
- Do your small groups have an eternal perspective? What do your groups do (or what *could* they do) to actively invest in kingdom work?

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Transformation: Two Key Practices

Learn how to help group members become more like Jesus.

1 John 2:6

There are two key leadership practices that will help leaders bring about transformation in the lives of their small group members—modeling and guiding.

Modeling: Growing in Christlikeness

1 Corinthians 11:1

The practice of modeling is accomplished by following God with increasing joy, humility and gratitude so that you are growing in total devotion to Christ.

In order to be effective leaders, we must model authentic Christian lives for our groups. With a partner, discuss the following: If you were going to train small group leaders to live out this key practice, what would you want them to know and/or be able to do at the end of the training? When you're finished, share your ideas with the whole group.

Guiding: Shepherding People Intentionally

Ephesians 4:12–13

The practice of guiding is achieved by listening and intentionally exploring the work of God in others so that you can help them take their next steps of spiritual growth.

In David Benner's book *Sacred Companions* (2004, InterVarsity), he discusses a new term, *spiritual accompaniment*. Spiritual accompaniment occurs when a leader walks with people in their journeys. The leader listens and tries to help the other person find clarity in what God is saying to them. These techniques are used:

- Acquiring good listening skills
 1. Reflective conversation—Clarify by saying, “What I heard you say was this. Did I hear that right?”
 2. Body language—What kind of nonverbal communication is occurring?
 3. Tone of voice—Discern the differences in voice inflection. Consider the difference between “I love you,” “I *love* you,” and “I love *you*.”
- Listening to the Holy Spirit and distinguishing his work in people's lives
- Asking good questions
- Praying for others

Ask Yourself

- Are you growing in Christlikeness in a way you would want others to emulate? What might you need to change?
- Do you think you are equipped to spiritually accompany the people in your small group? Why or why not?
- Would your spouse or best friend say you have good listening skills? Why or why not? What could you do to improve your listening skills?

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Community: Two Key Practices

Find out how to help people experience enriching relationships.

Hebrews 10:24–25

Building community in your small group will help you accomplish all of your purposes. Two key practices that will help you build community are facilitating and reconciling.

Facilitating: Building Authentic Relationships

Proverbs 27:17

The practice of facilitating is defined as maximizing group interaction in both formal and informal gatherings so that group members build authentic relationships in an environment of mutual accountability.

In our small groups, we need to facilitate spiritual conversations that leave us knowing each other better and knowing God better. How can we do that? Gather with several others and brainstorm a list of things leaders should know or be able to do in order to facilitate this kind of environment.

In addition to the ideas you brainstormed, take a look at these things leaders need to know.

- How to choose and use curriculum
- How to plan a meeting:
 - Purpose
 - Logistics
 - Activities
 - Needs
- How to pray with a group
- How to understand group dynamics
- How to ask good questions to encourage discussion

Reconciling: Engaging in and Resolving Conflict in a Healthy Manner

2 Timothy 4:2

The practice of reconciling is characterized by creating an environment where the truth is spoken in love so that group members experience reconciliation in their relationships with God and with other people.

There will be conflict between group members in our groups. If there is not conflict, either your group is new or your group is too polite and real growth will not happen. Conflict will happen between people, and conflict between us and God is ongoing. Highly effective leaders will work to resolve conflicts when, not if, they happen.

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TRAINING MATERIALS

8 Keys

Use the following questions to help in planning conflict resolution training.

1. How do you speak the truth in love?
2. How do you carry out conflict resolution as described in Matthew 18:15–17?
3. How do you reconcile after the conflict is resolved?
4. How do you set boundaries with group members?
5. How and when do you confront sin in a group member's life?

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Discuss

- How effective is your small group when it comes to building authentic relationships?
- How have you handled conflict in your group in the past? How effective was it? What could you have done differently?
- Can you foresee a conflict within your small group? How will you deal with it?

HANDOUT #3

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Compassion: Two Key Practices

Understand how to encourage group members to grow in love for others.

2 Corinthians 1:3–4

Leading a small group is more than just preparing for a Bible study. We also need to tangibly express Christ's compassion to each other and to the world around us. We do this through caring and connecting.

Caring: Cultivating a Servant's Heart

1 John 4:20–21

The practice of caring is achieved by guiding group members to tangible expressions of Christ's compassion so that they are caring for people's needs personally and through the resources of the church.

Effective leaders will model for their small groups how to be there for each other when they're hurting. They will know the limits of what they can help with and what they can't. They will also help their group identify and meet needs that are outside of their group—in the church and in the community.

There is an order in which we learn to serve:

1. Love each other in your group
2. Serve each other in your group
3. Serve a few at a time outside the group
4. Serve together outside the group

Connecting: Becoming an Inclusive Community

Matthew 25:35

The practice of connecting is accomplished by leading the group to invite and include others so that everyone can experience community.

We need to build radically inclusive communities that are open to people regardless of where they are in their spiritual journey. And we need to invite people to come. In Thom Rainer's book *The Unchurched Next Door* (2003, Zondervan), he tells us that 90% of people would be open to coming to church, Sunday school, or a small group if they were invited. So start inviting people, and when they come make them feel like they're a valued part of the group!

Discuss

- How can you serve the people in your small group?
- In what ways could your small group serve together outside the group?
- Would a newcomer feel welcome in your small group? Why or why not?
- Which of your neighbors will you invite to your small group this month?

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Mission: Two Key Practices

Discover ways to build a community with an eternal perspective.

Matthew 9:37–38

As leaders, it is our responsibility to encourage an evangelistic spirit in our hearts and in the hearts of our small group members. We must lead the charge in reaching out to others and guiding our group members to do the same.

Reaching: Initiating Spiritual Conversations

Ezekiel 34:16

The practice of reaching consists of helping group members understand each seeker's story and the best ways to impact that person with God's love so that seekers can experience a personal relationship with Christ.

When interacting with seekers, try using the 3-D method:

1. Develop a relationship. Strike up a friendship with someone who lives near you or someone you work with.
2. Discover their story. It's not so important that you share your story; it's important that you uncover theirs, listen, and ask questions.
3. Discern the best next step. Perhaps you invite them to your small group, a worship service, or even to participate in a service project.

In addition, leaders and group members will need to be trained in the following:

- How to initiate spiritual conversations
- How to live out the 3-D method of relationship-building
- How to lead someone to Christ

Reproducing: Developing Future Leaders

2 Timothy 2:2

The practice of reproducing is attained through guiding the growth of a new generation of leaders so that Christ's redemptive purposes can be accomplished in our lives, in our groups and in our community.

We need to ensure the next generation of leadership in our small groups. Train up apprentices and help them birth new small groups. Focus on multiplication of groups instead of addition of members to one group.

Discuss

- Who do you know at work or on your street with whom you can begin to develop a relationship?
- How would you initiate a spiritual conversation?
- Which person in your small group can you help develop into a leader?

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Small Group Leaders' Developmental Framework

Use the following grid to check your progress and gauge the effectiveness of your small group ministry.

Small Group Leaders' Developmental Framework		
Purpose <i>The life God desires</i>	Practices <i>The skills leaders develop</i>	Progress <i>The environment groups promote</i>
Transformation	Modeling	Pursue Christlikeness (the maturity challenge)
	Guiding	Practice Shepherding (the discipleship challenge)
Community	Facilitating	Build Authentic Relationships (the relational challenge)
	Reconciling	Engage in Healthy Conflict (the unity challenge)
Compassion	Caring	Cultivate a Servant's Heart (the impact challenge)
	Connecting	Become an Inviting Community (the inclusivity challenge)
Mission	Reaching	Initiate Spiritual Conversations (the evangelism challenge)
	Reproducing	Develop Future Leaders (the legacy challenge)

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HANDOUT #6

Developing Leaders in the Eight Key Practices

Learn some practical ways to train your leaders.

Luke 6:40

The goal of these eight key practices is not that our leaders will be able to list them. Most of them probably will not. The goal is that they'll live these practices out daily in their groups. Here are tips to develop your leaders and train them to live out these practices.

Deemphasize Classroom Training

People learn by trying, failing, and practicing. That's how we learn to tie our shoes and drive a car. Give leaders opportunities to practice what you want them to learn. Spend at least forty percent of your training time having them practice outside the classroom.

Use Self-Directed Learning

Create a website where your leaders can go for information and training. Or give your leaders names of websites where they can find information (see Additional Resources on page 13). This new arena for training is highly accessible to most of your leaders.

Supply self-directed resources for leaders who prefer materials in print. Develop a leaders' library where people can check out books, magazines, and journals.

Provide On-the-Job Training

One way to offer hands-on training is through group visits. A coach can drop by a small group for a planned group visit to observe the leaders. Later, the coach gives the small group leader feedback on his or her leadership skills.

Also, consider turbo groups, where small group leaders meet for several weeks or months for two-hour sessions. During the first hour, they conduct a small group meeting. This is followed by an hour of feedback, discussion, and debriefing of the meeting.

Be a Mentor

Both one-on-one and group mentoring situations can be beneficial. It's also helpful to provide "just in time" training for less experienced leaders who can call you with questions or concerns right before a small group meeting.

Discuss

- What type of trainer are you? Do you tend to be more lecture-oriented or action-oriented? What might you need to change to be more effective?
- What types of resources do you have available for self-directed training? In what ways can you provide these resources to your leaders?
- Are you a mentor? If so, how effective is it? If not, who could you begin to mentor?

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What Is Your Next Step?

Determine how you will begin to act on the eight key practices.

Nehemiah 2:18

It would be overwhelming to implement all eight of these practices and the training tips at once. So just take it a little bit at a time. The following guidelines should start you on your way.

Start Small

Look at the eight practices and choose two that you think you would like to improve on or put into action. Once you've spent some time on those two, choose two more, and so on. Do the same with the training tips. Choose one to begin with, and slowly add the other three.

Communicate with Key Leaders

One of the best things that you can do is to start having these discussions with key people in your church on a regular basis.

- Why do we do small groups?
- What's the purpose of small group ministry?
- What skills do we need to train small group leaders on?
- What are the key practices for our leaders so they can accomplish this?

Ask Yourself

- Which two practices will you start with?
- Which training tip will be most beneficial to you and your group?
- With which key church leaders will you communicate about small group ministry?

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Additional Resources

Additional Resources

Books, downloads, and websites to help you implement the eight key practices of effective small group leaders

Building Church Leaders: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- ☞ www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com
- “Small Groups” Assessment Pack
- “Developing Leadership Gifts” Assessment Pack
- “Shepherding Others” Training Theme
- “Healthy Small Groups” Training Theme
- “Growing Small Groups” Training Theme

BuildingSmallGroups.com: Small group ministry training resources from Christianity Today International.

- ☞ www.BuildingSmallGroups.com
- “Tools for Evaluating Your Small Group Ministry”

WillowGroups: Small groups resources site of the Willow Creek Association

- ☞ www.willowcreek.com/smallgroups

Community and Growth by Jean Vanier (Paulist Press, 1989; ISBN 978-0809131358)

How to Lead Small Groups by Neal McBride (NavPress, 1990; ISBN 978-0891093039)

Leading Life-Changing Small Groups by Bill Donahue (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 978-0310247500)

Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (HarperSanFrancisco, 1978; ISBN 978-0060608521)

Making Small Groups Work by Henry Cloud & John Townsend (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310250289)

Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership by Carl George and Warren Bird (Kingdom, 2001; ISBN 978-1883906139)

Sacred Companions by David G Benner (InterVarsity, 2004; ISBN 978-0830832705)

The Safest Place on Earth by Larry Crabb (W Publishing, 1999; ISBN 978-0849914560)

Walking the Small Group Tightrope by Bill Donahue & Russ Robinson (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310252290)

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