

Practical Ministry Skills

Ministering to Struggling Small-Group Leaders

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MINISTERING TO STRUGGLING SMALL-GROUP LEADERS

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How to Use This Resource

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

By Amy Jackson

I can still remember the sting of my shock. During a routine visit to one of my leaders' small groups, I discovered the leader was gossiping about several people in the church. She was sharing these non-group-members' personal struggles and hardships and masking them as prayer requests. I was shocked. Not only did she think this behavior was okay, but also she was willing to do it in front of me.

As I started to think back over the last few weeks, I remembered that the leader had complained that her group members did not have consistent attendance. At the time I didn't think too much about it and didn't look into it further. Oh how I regret that decision! I should have seen it as a warning sign of something more serious happening during the group meetings. I am so thankful that our ministry had regular group visits scheduled, though. Without them, I may not have discovered this issue until much later.

The next few weeks proved extraordinarily difficult as I tried to evaluate the situation, confront the leader, and restore health to the group. This isn't the easy or fun part of a coach's or small-group pastor's job, but it's absolutely necessary if we desire healthy small-group leaders and small-group ministries. Use this guide to gain practical skills and specific wisdom to effectively minister to struggling small-group leaders.

Proactive Prevention

The best thing you can do for a healthy small-group ministry is do your best to prevent leaders from ever becoming ineffective. "Proper Care and Feeding of Group Leaders" will help you support leaders from the start, while "Checking a Leader's RPMS" and "Warning Signs" will give you tools to keep your eyes open for signs of developing issues.

Specific Struggles

Even with our best preventive measures, some leaders will still struggle, and for a number of reasons. In this section you'll find articles on specific struggles and how to help restore leaders dealing with them. To start off, "Ministering to an Ineffective Leader" will help you when a leader just isn't leading well. Then, you'll find more serious issues including articles on leaders who are burned out, promoting bitterness, refusing help from a coach or pastor, addiction to pornography, and promoting heresy.

Difficult Conversations

Last, find great how-to articles that cover the specifics of confronting leaders and even removing leaders, if it comes to that point. These are difficult conversations, and we need wisdom in handling them well.

—AMY JACKSON is Associate Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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The Proper Care and Feeding of Group Leaders

Be proactive, make them a priority, and stress the importance of confidentiality.

By Steve Grusendorf

It's easy for small-group leaders to feel overwhelmed. And if we stop to consider all their responsibilities, it's even easier to see why: prepare the lesson, teach the lesson, lead the prayer time, coordinate the location, make sure there are plenty of snacks, and follow up with individuals outside the normal group meeting. Top all of this off with work, family, and other duties and it's clear why many small-group leaders are excellent candidates for spiritual burnout.

To make matters worse, small-group members often expect their group leader to have everything together. Group leaders can feel pressured to demonstrate a model marriage, a model devotional life, a model work ethic—the list goes on. It often gets to the point where small-group leaders feel unable to share their struggles and issues in the very groups they lead. How can they when the one causing many of their spiritual struggles may be sitting on the couch on the other side of the living room?

As leaders of small-group leaders, it is essential that coaches actively connect with those we lead, giving them ample opportunity to be refreshed and renewed. Here are some ways to do just that.

Create a Culture of Proactive Care

Tom had led a small group for years. So when he showed up in my office one day and told me that he couldn't handle leading his group any longer, I was astonished. He told me that the office he worked for had been keeping him on the road far longer than he was used to, and his family life was struggling because of it. He just did not have the time to lead his group. We worked it out so that one of the other couples in the group would lead the small group for the next few months while Tom and his wife could take a break.

Sometimes our leaders are so busy with life and ministry that they don't even think to bring up the fact that they are running on empty. As coaches, we have to engage them through a variety of vehicles in order to give them ample opportunity to stay healthy. Of course, meeting over coffee or lunch is a great way to stay connected. Our church has multiple services on Sunday morning, and since my small-group leaders are already at the church, I will often meet them during a service or between a Christian education class and the worship service they attend. I also utilize a web-based survey that my leaders routinely fill out.

There is no right or wrong way to connect with your leaders; just make sure you are proactive. Don't wait until they break down in your office before stepping in to offer help.

Commit to Priority Follow-Up

Dennis had been struggling for some time with a difficult member in his small group. He wanted this individual to stay with the group, but the person just seemed to command all the attention at every meeting. Dennis and I connected for coffee and discussed how he might go about handling the situation. Several weeks went by before I remembered to follow up with Dennis to see how things went. When I finally got a hold of him, I found out that the situation had taken a turn for the worse. His group was really struggling and did not seem to be having any success in dealing with the individual in question. Dennis asked if I could help, and I was glad to—but I apologized for not checking in sooner.

After you create a culture of proactive care, you need to place a high priority on your leaders' needs. Some people ask me at times why I don't lead a small group myself. The truth is, I do—sort of. My small group consists of the small-group leaders under my care. While we may not get together weekly, we certainly are a community. They get my first and my best when it comes to ministry time.

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When a group leader raises a flag, we coaches need to respond quickly and appropriately. This has a twofold benefit. First, it allows you to help them overcome the challenge, and it helps them stay spiritually healthy. Second, it encourages them for the next time they face a challenge. Consistent priority follow-up creates a consistently healthy ministry.

Consistently Strive for Confidentiality

I have always told my group leaders that I have an open door for them, so I was glad when Susan and Anthony came to talk with me. They were small-group leaders whose group had just finished going through a six-week study on godly marriages. The problem was that they were struggling with their own marriage. They picked that particular curriculum because they felt they needed it as much as their group did. We talked for a while about their marriage and decided they should see a counselor, but that the situation was not bad enough to take a break from leading their group. We committed the issue to prayer and promised to keep the matter between ourselves. I was glad they trusted me.

Without confidentiality, you will not get to the heart of the matter when group leaders do interact with you. Your small-group leaders need to know, without a doubt, that you will hold their confidence. This doesn't mean we gloss over sin when it's present, but it does mean we help leaders overcome the challenges they face in a God-honoring way. If your leaders cannot trust you, they will not come to you. Let them know in no uncertain terms that connecting with you is safe and healthy. This will help you meet their needs and keep them going strong in ministry.

It's sad to think that many small-group leaders feel overwhelmed and under-fed, especially when they consistently care for their group members week after week. It's time they had someone to lead them well, so let's make sure we coaches are there when they need us.

Steve is a pastor and blogger who lives in Wisconsin. His blog, www.martyrpriest.com uses a mix of spiritual contemplations and social commentary to help readers lose their life and find their purpose.

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Discuss:

1. What other unique pressures do small-group leaders face?
2. What systems can coaches use to help make follow-up a consistent priority?
3. When have you as a coach dropped the ball? What have you learned from that mistake?

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Checking a Leader's RPMS

Assisting your leaders' relational, physical, mental, and spiritual development

By Community Christian Church

When coaching small-group leaders, relational development is the core out of which everything else will grow. With that in mind, RPMS provides a way to easily remember the areas of a leader's life that we want to influence as a coach. Just as we check the RPMs on a car to see how well it is running, we can check the RPMS on ourselves and our leaders to see if all is in balance. RPMS stands for Relational, Physical, Mental, and Spiritual. The idea comes from Jesus' growth in Luke 2: "And Jesus grew in wisdom [mental] and stature [physical], and in favor with God [spiritual] and men [relational]."

Before we go any further, let's be honest: relationships take time. Does the idea of addressing these four areas of your leaders' lives feel uncomfortable right now? It should. Diving right into an RPMS conversation before a relationship has been established will likely do the opposite of what you are trying to accomplish—developing a close, trusting relationship.

In addition, having an RPMS conversation with a leader is countercultural to our individualistic way of doing life. Culturally, we are just not used to asking people how their physical health is, let alone their relational and spiritual health. So take your time and use some relational wisdom. You were likely chosen as a coach because of your leadership and relational gifts. You will need to rely on these instincts and God's prompting to know when the time is right to begin the RPMS conversation.

Relational

Our relational world is the people with whom we interact regularly—our immediate family, friends, neighbors, and small-group members. Getting to know your leaders means getting to know their relational world.

Here are some good questions to ask about relationships:

- How are things at home?
- What about your family life is going well? What would you like to change?
- Who do you consider your closest friend? How is God using that relationship to grow you?
- What are your relationships like at work?
- What is the most challenging relationship in your life? The most rewarding?

Physical

What comes to mind when you think of someone's physical wellbeing? Maybe sickness and health? Diet and exercise? Rest and pace? All of these things are part of it. The physical aspect of our lives and ministry is the ability to have a balanced, healthy life. This is probably one of the most overlooked aspects of a leader's life. However, if we are truly serious about developing the whole person, we have to help our leaders see that our physical wellbeing can affect our ability to lead any given ministry with enthusiasm, passion, and energy.

Here are some good questions to ask about physical balance:

- How is your work schedule?
- What does a good night's rest look like for you?
- Where is your energy level on a scale of 1–10?
- What about your physical health do you want to change? What parts of that are in your control? What parts are out of your control?

Mental

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Another often-overlooked aspect of coaching is the development of your leader's mind. One aspect of this developmental process is to keep a good pulse on the "education" of your leaders. What are they learning from the biblical teaching they have been exposed to? What are they learning in their own times of Bible study or through their small group? What books are they reading to sharpen their skills as a leader, to challenge their growth as a Christ follower, or to stretch their understanding of their culture?

Some of us are highly motivated as self-learners; others need the accountability and encouragement of a friend or mentor to take the initiative in developing our minds. Part of our responsibility as coaches is to make sure our leaders are being equipped for life and the ministry they have been called to. Regularly ask your leaders about the things God is teaching them, and encourage them to apply that learning to their lives and ministry in real and practical ways.

As coaches, not only can we help our leaders absorb learning, we can also help them filter out certain thoughts and information. We can ask questions that help us gauge if our leaders are avoiding certain forms of media or entertainment that may be negatively affecting their thought lines. By asking about their learning, we can help them avoid being influenced by unhealthy theological sources. By discussing what's on their minds, we may discover areas of their understanding that are misguided and need to be replaced with biblical truth.

Checking the "M" of your leader's RPMS can be a little intimidating. It requires that you listen with careful discernment and speak the truth with wisdom and love. As you talk with your leader, maintain a constant prayer in your heart for God's wisdom to flood your heart and saturate your words (James 1:5). Here are some good questions to ask about mental learning:

- What have you been learning lately?
- How have you applied your ongoing leadership training to your small group?
- What thoughts have been dominating your mind lately? Are these thoughts having a positive or negative effect on your life? Are they thoughts that are pleasing to God? Is there something that needs to be corrected in your thought life?

Spiritual

In Joel Comiskey's book *Home Cell Group Explosion*, he presents the results of a survey he conducted among the largest churches in the world. This survey revealed that personality and gifts weren't the biggest factor in the growth of the church—prayer and the devotional lives of the leaders were. Spiritual vitality is crucial to your leader's life and effectiveness in ministry. When leaders' hearts are intimately connected to God, they will be tuned to his leading and effective ministry will flow from their lives.

Too many times we get this turned around. We fill our lives with the tasks of ministry and find very little time left to connect with God. When this happens, not only are we in danger of wearing out (because we aren't staying connected to our Source of strength and power), but we are also in danger of missing God's plan and purposes because we aren't sensitive to the leading of his Spirit.

The number-one responsibility of a leader is to grow in his or her own relationship with God. As a coach, you can help your leaders figure out what they need to do to find and maintain intimacy with God. It might be different for each person, and may even differ for the same person through different seasons of life. But it is crucial that your leaders are building and protecting things in their lives that will nourish and grow their spirits.

One of the best ways to pursue intimacy with God is through the practice of spiritual disciplines. Remember, the goal is not the discipline itself; the goal is intimacy with God. But spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, journaling, meditating on Scripture, worship, fasting, retreats, memorizing Scripture, and others are doorways that help usher our hearts into the presence of God where he can speak to us, lead us, equip us, and strengthen us for the mission he has called us to.

Here are some good questions to ask about spiritual health:

- Does your relationship with God feel close and intimate right now? If not, can you think of something in your life that is standing in the way?

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- What combinations of spiritual disciplines do you need in your daily life to keep your heart connected with God?
- How could I help hold you accountable to the practice of those disciplines?
- How has God been speaking to you lately? What has he been saying?

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Discuss:

1. Which of the RPMS will be most difficult for you to ask a leader about? Which will be easiest? Why?
2. How many of your relationships with small-group leaders are ready for an RPMS conversation?
3. How can you work these questions into your regular interaction and conversations with group leaders?

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Warning Signs

How to recognize a small-group leader is in trouble

By Mark Ingmire

It's the small-group pastor's worst nightmare. A phone call comes from a group leader or group member, explaining a problem that is causing heated division in the small group and has the potential to create disunity in the church. Sometimes, as in this scenario, problems in small groups clearly present themselves and seem sudden. Many times, though, problems are like volcanoes that let steam escape indicating something is dangerously lurking beneath the surface. When the pressure becomes too great, the problem surfaces, destroying everything it touches. What are the warning signs that something unhealthy is happening underneath the surface in a leader's life or in group life? Once you recognize these warning signs, you must be ready to relieve the pressure before greater trouble explodes.

Warning Signs

1. *Conflict in the small group.* Conflict can be about almost anything. In my own experience, some of the more popular topics include thoughtless comments, inadequate childcare, and unmet expectations. Conflict in a group can be between the leader and the group or between group members. Either way, when a leader experiences conflict in the small group, there is no hiding it. Wise leaders know they don't have to work through it alone and will seek help.

I know a small-group leader who was in constant conflict with his group. This leader complained that his group wanted to kick him out of leadership. It sounded unbelievable, but after some investigation, I realized the group had become so frustrated with the leader doing only what he wanted that they really did want to remove him. If the leader had humbled himself, listened, and tried to understand his group's rebellion, he would have realized what was causing the group members' discontent. He allowed his own preferences and personality to control the group and eventually lost the group.

How do you keep group conflict pressure from building? The first step is to respond quickly to the warning signs. Encourage your leaders to listen with understanding. Explain that listening isn't about giving advice, telling your own war stories, or minimizing the problem. Listening is about affirming the other person by identifying their feelings and the content of their conflict. When leaders spend time listening, they can more easily find a solution. In Matthew 18, Jesus lays out the steps for conflict resolution, and none of those steps is possible without listening.

2. *Small group-attendance drops.* Another warning sign that trouble is brewing occurs when small-group attendance drops and there is no apparent conflict in the group. When a group leader comes to me because his group attendance has dropped for reasons other than members moving away, it usually means there is a problem the leader has not identified. The problem could be anything: the group starting or ending late, problems with childcare, the current Bible study, a group member's disruptive behavior, or even the group leader's lacking ownership and enthusiasm for the small group. Group members don't put up with conflict for long. They either address it head-on or leave the small group.

How do you address the pressure from dropping attendance before it gets worse? A great way to identify issues, including a drop in attendance, is to regularly evaluate the group. You can do this by having the small group review their covenant every three months or at the end of a Bible study series. This will familiarize everyone with the covenant. If something has been bugging a group member, he or she has a safe platform to make that concern known. Additionally, a coach or small-group pastor who makes regular visits to group meetings has a good idea of what's occurring in the group and can offer help.

3. *The small group does not meet consistently.* The small group is having difficulty meeting consistently. Meetings and activities are scheduled, but at the last minute group members cancel or just never show up. The group members say they want to meet, but have trouble actually showing up.

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You should address this issue the same way you address a decline in attendance. Additionally, evaluating the leader's view of the group and the members' views of the group can shed some light on why this might be occurring. Regular visits from a coach help illuminate any issues as well.

4. *The leader's church participation declines.* When you see a leader's regular church involvement decrease, particularly attendance at the weekend worship service, you know something is wrong. This decrease can be caused by a variety of things. Sometimes the leader is dealing with a moral failure. Other times there is conflict between the leader and others in the church. A leader's attendance can also decline because of health issues. Regardless of the reason, a decline in participation is a warning sign that a leader is having problems that will most likely affect that person's responsibilities.

A great way to reduce the chances of this warning sign from appearing is to develop a system of small group leader support. Don't just plug leaders into ministry and forget about them. Develop a system that provides leader support and connection with the church as a whole. Using a coaching model can be a great way to set up regular care and training of leaders.

5. *The leader does not respond to e-mails or phone calls.* When leaders don't respond to your phone calls and e-mails, it's usually a sure sign that they are having difficulty. Additionally, if a leader is not communicating with you, communication with the small group may not be happening either. While this is not always true, it should send up a warning flare that something may not be going well with the leader or group.

How do you handle a leader who hasn't responded to your e-mails, letters, and phone calls, when you haven't crossed paths during a weekend service? Don't try to communicate through the group members. Keep pursuing the leader. As a last resort, send an e-mail or letter with a deadline attached: if you don't hear from the leader by a certain date, you will assume he or she is no longer leading a group. While I don't recommend this method as a general rule, in my experience it has captured the attention of these leaders and they responded quickly.

Preventing the Eruption Altogether

While there is nothing you can do to guarantee that your leaders will never be in trouble, there are some practical things you can do to help minimize the chances of problems.

1. *Communicate often with your leaders.* If you want leaders to come to you when they are in trouble, you need to build relationships with them. It's easy to send out e-mails or Facebook messages with tips on how to have a great group, but mass messages don't communicate care and a desire to build relationships. The best way to build a relationship with your leaders is to have eye-to-eye contact. Next best is having a phone conversation. Even a personal e-mail or Facebook message can go a long way, but such messages should not be the primary way you are building your relationship.

2. *Provide on-going training.* Whether group leaders admit it or not, they all need additional training. This training can take various forms. It might be a gathering of all your small-group leaders; it may be a small gathering of a few leaders to share struggles and best practices; or it may be one-on-one with a coach or pastor. I utilize all these approaches to on-going training because each has its own strengths and helps build unity and community within our small groups. The key to any approach you choose is consistency and regularity.

3. *Be evaluated regularly.* I regularly ask all my small-group leaders, various staff peers, supervisors, and friends to evaluate me. While evaluations can be uncomfortable, I look forward to them because they help keep me on course spiritually, emotionally, and professionally. Evaluations identify a problem and allow me to make course corrections. Group leaders find the same benefit from self-evaluation and asking the small group to evaluate them.

4. *Regularly remind leaders what you expect of them.* Every two to three years we share with all our group leaders our "moral authority" talk. This talk simply sets the standard for how a leader is to set the example for his or her group. The "moral authority" talk doesn't mean that leaders are perfect. However, we do need to call our leaders to a biblical standard of living and make this expectation clear. When our senior pastor gives this message, I have to admit that I am inspired. What he describes is how I want to live. I want our small-group

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leaders to be inspired, too. People will rise to the challenge more often if they are inspired rather than simply told what to do.

No matter how many preventive measures you employ, don't be surprised when problems occur in small groups. Life with others, regardless of who they are, will be messy. The key is to respond to the warning signs you see. Don't sit back and hope the problem will fix itself. Be proactive and give yourself permission to make mistakes. While confrontation and troubleshooting are often uncomfortable, taking the risk to find a solution is necessary to the success of small-group leaders and their groups.

—MARK INGMIRE is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. How do you connect with your leaders currently? Does your method allow you to see warning signs?
2. What have you done in the past when you saw these warning signs?
3. Have you ever ignored a warning sign? What happened as a result? What did you learn from that experience?

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Ministering to an Ineffective Leader

Identifying common causes and common cures

By Seth Widner

In a perfect world, every small group would be healthy. Small-group leaders would always be effective and life-change would be a weekly occurrence. The role of a small-group pastor would be a stress-free position because we would never lack effective leaders. Yes, this would be a great place to live!

In reality, James 3:2 reminds us, "We all stumble in many ways." This means small-group pastors will oversee a ministry containing people who stumble in many ways. Small-group pastors and church leaders are not immune to the truth in this verse either. It's important to have biblical expectations for people and be prepared to handle those seasons of stumbling.

At some point in ministry, every small-group pastor (or ministry point person) will have to deal with ineffective leadership. I'm not talking about leaders who commit major sins or mistakes. I'm referring to the leaders who simply are not getting the job done. These leaders tend to fly under the radar, sometimes for several months, before a church leader is aware of the issue. Once ineffective leadership is brought to the surface, however, it must be addressed quickly—a difficult task even for veteran pastors.

Five Common Causes for Ineffective Leadership

Below are several factors that often contribute to a leader's ineffectiveness. Understanding why leaders struggle will give you a great foundation for ministering to them.

- *Lack of training.* Training is a major key to successful leadership. Every group leader must be equipped to lead a small group, and if a ministry lacks quality training, the leaders will struggle. Small-group leaders need two types of training: startup and ongoing. The startup training should provide practical skills for beginning a small group, and the ongoing training helps leaders overcome obstacles as group life progresses.

Does your church offer both? It's common for small-group pastors to leave out some needed ingredients, especially when the ministry is new. So evaluate your training process. Have the leaders been properly equipped with start-up training? Are they facing obstacles that were not addressed during training?

- *Lack of understanding.* In order for your training to be properly applied, it must first be understood. If leaders aren't performing well, perhaps they haven't processed the training they experienced. Don't assume that people understand something just because they hear it.

You can also prevent this by allowing for time to process during training. Have leaders meet together in pairs to talk through possible scenarios, or engage leaders in a game that tests their knowledge of the topics covered that day. Very few people learn simply by listening. Engage your leaders by training them in multiple ways.

- *Lack of communication.* The lines of communication must be open between small-group leaders and church leadership. Sometimes group leaders will not report a problem, perhaps assuming it isn't big enough to bother with. But withholding information is never a good thing. Ignoring a problem will not make it go away. In fact, problems tend to grow with time. Have you been in regular communication with the leader who is struggling? If not, you may have pinpointed the cause of their trouble.
- *Lack of preparation.* Leading a small-group meeting is not easy, and some leaders struggle simply because they don't prepare enough. They neglect to put enough time into the process of preparing. They procrastinate and try to cram some ideas at the last minute. All of this leads to mistakes and missed opportunities. How often do you ask your leaders how they're preparing? Hearing about their process can

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help you understand a lot about how meetings are run.

- *Lack of initiative.* Sometimes small-group leaders are not as enterprising or resourceful as we'd like them to be. This lack of initiative may stem from a variety of factors: distraction from the stresses of life, low self-esteem, personality types, extreme shyness, fatigue, and so on. Some leaders are simply lazy or apathetic. Any of these factors must be addressed in order for the leader to improve. Knowing which factor is contributing to a leader's lack of initiative is imperative to effectively minister to him or her.

How to Help Leaders Get Back On Track

There are several steps you need to take when working with a struggling small-group leader. Here are the major landmarks.

- *Set up a meeting.* This initial meeting needs to be accomplished face-to-face. Find a good time to meet in an environment where you both can be open. The location must allow both you and the leader to feel comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings without worrying who may be within earshot. Psalm 34:14 says, "Seek peace and pursue it."

When the meeting happens, don't skip the small talk. Having a formal (or even chiding) tone will make the meeting awkward. Be yourself and talk to the leader as a friend.

- *Remember the vision.* 2 Peter 1:13 says, "I think it is right to refresh your memory...." Sometimes we assume that our small-group leaders will remember everything we say. This assumption comes from our passion to eat, drink, breathe, and dream about small-group ministry. The fact is that it is impossible to remember everything we hear, and we, and our leaders, deserve to be reminded.

Leaders need to be reminded of God's vision for your church's small-group ministry. As you do this, include stories of life-change. Personal stories will help them see the importance of the vision. They will come face-to-face with the reality that Christ desires to use them for life-change.

- *Cast the vision of a healthy group.* This is your opportunity to evaluate the leader's ability to picture a healthy group. Ask them to describe the attributes of a healthy group. If a struggling leader can envision a healthy group, they know where they need to be moving group members. This helps them establish a desired destination. Philippians 3:14 says, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." If a leader does not understand the attributes of a healthy group, then he or she will settle for second best.

Be sure to listen for false expectations during this step. Rookie leaders often think that a healthy group is a perfect group. This sets them up for a huge let down. Healthy groups still have problems from time to time. People will argue, selfish motives will be exposed, and feelings may be hurt. What determines the health of a group is how the group members respond to a problem.

- *Identify what is holding them back.* This can be the most difficult step because it requires a leader to be vulnerable. So be sure to affirm leaders that your intention is to help them grow. If leaders are to grow, they must be able to recognize any obstacle the group faces. They also must be able to see how it is negatively affecting the health of the group.

This step requires absolute honesty from the group leader. As you listen, be sure to pick up on the condition of the group. This step normally will give you a clear picture of the group's life.

- *Plan to overcome.* Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." This is where the rubber meets the road. Once the leader has identified obstacles, he or she must find a way to navigate their group toward some victories. Help the leader create practical steps to overcome the obstacles.

Make sure that each step is realistic. For example, perhaps a leader's group contains a high level of conflict between members. Maybe they've had a falling out of some kind. It would be unrealistic for a leader to

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think the group members would become the best of friends in a matter of days. Relational healing can take time.

Stopping leaders from creating unrealistic steps will prevent them from further ineffectiveness. It will also help them learn to invest more time in preparation. Once leaders have established practical steps, put them on a timeline. Ask them: When will you accomplish this step?

- *Give them a choice.* It is crucial for leaders to take responsibility for their words and actions. They must commit to take ownership of their group's past, present, and future. A verbal commitment can create powerful momentum to follow through on established plans. By choosing to pursue a solution, the leader will be claiming ownership of the practical steps that must be taken.

Help leaders see the natural consequences of their actions, too. "If you commit to this plan, then you can expect my ongoing support. But if you cannot commit to this plan today, we need to re-evaluate some things." Be clear and speak directly. This step places a small-group leader in a position to make a choice. Step back and let the leader choose.

- *Set up a future evaluation.* Romans 14:12 says, "Each of us will give an account of himself." This step helps ensure leaders will follow through. They know that on a specific date, they will be held accountable for taking action. It also helps them sense that you care for them. Taking the time to set up a follow-up meeting communicates the fact that you value that particular leader.

—SETH WIDNER is Family Pastor of The Journey Church in Fernandina Beach, Florida; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Which of the five common causes does your church need to improve on?
2. How can you improve training, understanding, communication, preparation, and initiative in your ministry so you can prevent leaders from struggling?
3. How does your ministry seek to get leaders back on track? Are there things you can add from this article?

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Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who's Burned Out After All?

Identifying and ministering to leaders facing burn out

By Peri Gilbert

It would be nice in today's chaotic world to have a mirror that would allow us to peer into the lives of our small-group leaders, not for the sake of giving them a poisoned apple, but for the sake of saving them from the poisoned apple of burnout. However, since no such mirror exists, identifying the symptoms of burnout, and knowing how to minister to those in the midst of it, are keys to saving our leaders from a deadly bite into burnout.

Avoidance

Unanswered phone calls, cancelled lunches, and hurried hellos seem to meet you every time you try to speak with John. He always has a viable excuse to offer you for why he cannot chat. They seem like feasible excuses, but your gut (your mirror) tells you that John is simply avoiding you.

Why would a leader not want to visit? Because the inevitable question is coming, "Are you doing okay?" or "How are things going?" That is the last question anyone wants to face who is drowning in exhaustion due to mounting responsibilities or troublesome life circumstances. Leaders dread telling you the reality of their lives because they equate stating "I can't lead" with failure. Leaders feel they have failed not only you, but also God. Therefore, they avoid you and their issues altogether.

Lack of Enthusiasm and Empathy

Small-group leaders facing burnout also lack enthusiasm and empathy. We all have experienced that loss of driving excitement. In addition to being a life-group coach, I am a teacher. Each year I am excited at the beginning of school. Meeting new students and being involved in new lives is an incredible experience. However, after a while, my excitement wanes because life steps in. Responsibilities accrue and before I know it, my emotional tank is running on empty. I am left with very little enthusiasm, and my ability to empathize with students is dangling by a thin string.

Our leaders are no different. They too are investing in multiple life roles, and that act requires enthusiasm. If they are not careful, leaders will find themselves tending to the lives of multiple people while ignoring their own lives and the demands of their own responsibilities. Soon leaders discover they have emptied themselves into their small-group members and have nothing left to give their own families or themselves. They eventually reach a place where they no longer have the enthusiasm or desire to empathize with others as they discuss their problems because they themselves are facing their own exploding world.

Cancelling Group Meetings

Due to the lack of enthusiasm and empathy, a leader facing burnout may begin shutting down personally and emotionally. A leader may also shut down during group meetings. As leaders come face-to-face with burnout, they distance themselves from others. The leader is avoiding not only you, but also anyone who may glimpse vulnerability. As this spiral continues, a leader may begin cancelling group meetings. The thought of displaying emotion related to current conditions overwhelms the leader and the cancellations begin. On the other hand, cancelling the group may begin on the side of the members. Because a chasm begins to develop between the leader and group members, group members may begin to feel awkward or no longer connected to the leader; therefore, they withdraw from the group until there is no group left to meet.

"Over the Top" Excitement

While avoidance, lack of enthusiasm and empathy, and cancelling sessions are indicators of burnout, there is another indicator of impending burnout for a leader: extreme happiness and excitement. We do not often

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associate happiness and excitement with burnout, but when a leader's happiness and excitement is "over the top," he or she may be headed for burnout or enveloped in it.

You know your leaders. You know when the smiles, bubblyness, and craziness are masking something. I never equated my ability to "bounce off the walls" with hiding my pain. I could be involved in everything: lead life groups, help people in need, run a gamut of ministries, and never need a thing. Or so I thought. The first time my extreme happiness was brought to my attention was when my pastor called me on it. I figured he just didn't understand my enthusiasm for life. However, two months later I found myself in a counselor's office crying, depressed, and simply out of emotional energy. All the excitement and happiness I had presented was nothing more than a shield from my own pain and exhaustion. When leaders display "over the top" ecstatic behavior, they may be trying to muster enough energy to lead their small group. The desire not to fail you, God, or those in the group is a factor in not resigning from leading the group. But the greater factor is the deep desire to avoid facing their own pain. Leaders may go full-throttle with the energy they have left in hopes of masking the reality of what little emotional and spiritual energy they actually have to give.

You Need to Know Your Leaders

While we may not like the thought of losing a leader, we need leaders who are emotionally, spiritually, and physically healthy if we want healthy, life changing groups. In order to have thriving groups, leaders must be able to give from the overflow of what they are receiving from Christ. If leaders are drained, they can give nothing. Therefore, it is imperative for us as ministers and coaches to help leaders accept their current state and understand the importance of rest.

As stated previously, you need to know your leaders. Spend time with them before, during, and after the small-group season. Just because small groups have concluded for a season don't mean small-group leaders' lives have stopped. Life rolls on and so do the curve balls life likes to throw. The only way you can know if you are being avoided, if your leader has a lack of enthusiasm, or if the leader is too happy is to spend time getting to know leaders' true selves. The more we know them, the better chance we have of spotting the burnout in their lives. Take a leader to lunch, visit leaders and their families, or call leaders. The more investment in the leaders' lives, the more opportunity you have to help your leaders face the burnout they're in or help them avoid it before it hits.

Taking Time to Listen

Along with taking time to invest in your leaders, taking time to listen to what is—and is not said—is critical in helping leaders. In a rushed world, it seems everyone tries to talk at once, and you simply hope you're heard. But as ministers and coaches, it's important for us to slow down and listen so our leaders know they're heard—whether they say a word or not. If you're unsure if a leader is facing burnout, taking time to catch up on life, listening carefully to both what is and is not said, can help you clarify whether the leader is burned out. Is the leader engaging in conversation? Is there discomfort when talking about life? Is little said in response to questions? What is not said should tell you something is amiss. Even if you can't make contact with all your leaders, sending a card, text, or calling them can let your leaders know that you're there for them.

Regularly Provide Tools

Another avenue to helping leaders during burnout is providing tools to help them identify burnout in their own lives. Misunderstandings about burnout may cause leaders to avoid us because they don't know what is going on in their own lives to be able to talk with us. Or, they may be embarrassed because they're equating the lack of desire to lead with failure. As ministers and coaches, it is our responsibility to let our leaders know that maintaining personal, emotional, and spiritual health is essential to any leadership position, including small groups. At The Simple Church, LIFE group coaches meet with leaders once a month during the semester to find out how they're doing and how their groups are doing. Coaches also use this time to provide leaders with tools they can use to help group members and themselves grow. You could also share the symptoms of burnout with leaders; provide an assessment they can take to monitor their own emotional, spiritual, and physical health; or do a simple study that focuses on the leaders' well-being. If a meeting is not feasible, you could provide this information to leaders through e-mail.

Know When It's Beyond You

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While coaches and ministers take on the role of counselor with our leaders, there are times when our leaders' issues may be more than we can handle. Additionally, some leaders may feel more comfortable talking with someone outside the church. Therefore, in emphasizing the importance of a healthy spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical life, it would be beneficial for you to supply your leaders with the names of trusted counselors in your area that can help them if they're struggling. In doing so, you promote an atmosphere of health and healing where it's acceptable to be broken.

By accepting brokenness, we can give our leaders something more important than all the items mentioned above—the freedom to be human. We often place demands on ourselves that not even God requires. Before we know it, we are knee-deep in emotional and spiritual quicksand. The more our burdens take over, the sooner we face sinking into burnout because we're trying to get out of the pit by ourselves. When we're ashamed of where we are, we don't cry out for help. If we let our leaders know that it's acceptable to be human, to be a sinner, to be imperfect, we offer them a great gift: to be themselves. The more we emphasize that it is okay to have struggles (they are inevitable in this life), the more we offer our leaders the peace they need to approach us with their current circumstances. This will allow us the opportunity to encourage them and, if need be, offer them a season of rest.

By knowing our leaders and the signs of burnout, we may very well prevent our leaders from taking a bite from the poisonous apple of burnout. And knowing how to help leaders in the midst of burnout will enable us to have stronger small groups and stronger leaders.

—PERI GILBERT is the Small-Group Coordinator at The Simple Church in Bossier City, LA; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. How often do you take the time to really listen to your leaders? Do you actively listen for what is not said?
2. How might you provide tools for your leaders to evaluate themselves and have trusted friends evaluate them?
3. Do your leaders know that you accept brokenness? What might making this known do for the culture of your small-group ministry?

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When a Leader Promotes Bitterness against the Church

Signs of a problem, and steps to remedy the situation

By Linda McCullough Moore

In a small group, much like a family, a root of bitterness can take hold in ways that are subtle and unspoken, but nonetheless dangerous. Worse, such roots often spread outside the group and begin wreaking havoc long before they are discovered and dealt with.

The causes of these feelings of bitterness are as numerous and varied as the leaders themselves. To the extent that a group replicates a family in its gathering people into a common endeavor, it can stir up feelings from the leader's and members' own families of origin. Groups often bring to the fore unresolved personal issues for both group members and group leaders. Training for group leaders should always make explicit this potential and suggest ways of recognizing it and dealing with it when it occurs. Group leaders should be encouraged to share this with the coach or pastor if it should become an issue for them.

A group can also become a place where people feel safe voicing concerns and discomforts. Without proper leadership, the group environment can foster a willingness for group members to share the others' complaints. This atmosphere can sometimes make a leader feel empowered to be the voice of the discontent. Group leaders' training should include teaching helpful ways to deal with this possibility.

Additionally, no one is happy with everything in a given church, and a group can become the place to vent these feelings. A leader must be taught and supported in ways to create a group environment where this is handled with sensitivity and wisdom.

Whatever the cause or causes, it is vital that pastors and church leaders be attuned to these problems—able to spot them when danger signs appear—and be equipped to deal with them in a mature and biblical way.

Signs There May Be a Problem

- Members of a given group express the same discontent with the church in the same manner or language.
- Members of the group attend their own meetings but are seen less frequently at corporate worship services.
- A group begins holding other, outside, entirely exclusive meetings.
- A group writes a letter of complaint to the church, with all members signing the letter.
- New forms of doctrine or belief systems are heard from several group members.
- The group leader stops attending services, strives to undermine the pastor or church leaders, shows disrespect in meetings, or contacts outsiders such as local media and denomination overseers with complaints.

Steps to Address Possible Problems

The first step always is a one-to-one meeting with the group leader and the small-group pastor or coach. This meeting should be focused on listening. The church representative should invite the leader to share about the group. How is it going? Leaders might share about attendance, cohesion, blessings, problems, plans for the future, and any need for help.

This meeting must be a setting where group leaders feel safe and free to share about any personal challenges. This is critical. This alone may help address any underlying issue and, in time, solve the problem itself.

Leaders should also be encouraged to share anything they wish about the nature of their interaction with the coach, church staff, and congregation at large. Do they feel supported? Is anything going on that makes their

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group leadership more challenging? How might the small-group pastor and church better support the leader's work?

Only after the group leader has had a generous opportunity to address all of this, should the coach share that he or she appreciates the leader's openness and honesty, share any concerns about the leader's bitterness against the church, and explore together if it is intentional or not. The coach should not bring a long list of examples, but rather explore the feelings of the leader toward the church. The coach should not say, "You've been saying or doing this." Rather, "I would like us to have a chance to explore together what your feelings are towards the church and how you think you might be communicating them to the members of your group, or to others outside the group."

This step has great potential for fostering understanding and defusing the situation, allowing for some movement toward sharing ideas for improvement and problem solving. If the outcome of this meeting is good, a follow-up meeting should help assess positive movements toward change.

If the outcome of this meeting is not good, the coach should hold a meeting with the leader and one other person to address the problem. This could be the senior pastor, small-group pastor, or another church leader who is known for both wisdom and grace. This meeting can get down to specifics in a much more concrete way with the coach and pastor outlining specific concerns and offering any help that might be required.

If a Resolution Is Not Achieved

If the group leader and church representatives are not able to find a good resolution, you should consider a number of steps depending upon the severity of the situation and the personality of the group leader. No one solution will fit every case.

It may be a good idea to offer the group leader a break from leadership until you find a solution. If you do so, you'll need to determine on a case-by-case basis how much or how little to share with the whole group about the change of leadership. Ideally, the group leader, the coach, the pastor, and the new group leader should be present when the group hears about the change. This can eliminate problems going forward.

In extreme cases, where no remedy is found and where the leader is sowing dissension in the church, he or she should be removed from the leadership position altogether. This deserves some discussion. When we have gifted leaders—those who are knowledgeable about Scripture and teach well—we tend to assume that their work is benefitting God's Kingdom. This may or may not be the case. These questions need exploration:

- Does the work of this leader bring honor and glory to the triune God?
- Does this leader promote the unity of the body of Christ?
- Does this leader draw Christians and others closer to the Lord as Savior and Sovereign?
- Does the work of this leader cause dissension among Christians in a way that is pleasing to the enemy of our souls?

These are areas that require deep spiritual discernment and prayer on the part of a group of believers working together. The fruit of a person's life and witness are indicators of the blessing of the Lord on the work of the leader. While it is a difficult decision to remove someone from leadership, we must consider the affect the person is having on group life. If the affect is not God-glorifying, the leader must be removed.

— LINDA MCCULLOUGH MOORE; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Are your leaders able to discuss their concerns honestly with you? How might you deepen their trust in you?
2. When addressing your concerns with a leader, do you tend to make your concerns known or ask the leader's perspective first? What might be the outcome of your method?
3. How might you train leaders to deal with complaints shared in the group meeting?

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When a Leader Refuses Help

Being a faithful pastor to everyone involved

By Trevor Lee

A Confrontation Gone Wrong

One of my first ministry posts was as the pastor of a young adult ministry in a large church. One of the women involved was passionate about singing and quickly became a part of our worship team. She was outspoken and asserted herself as a leader. This was good because the young worship team needed leadership. Though it wasn't in an official capacity, her unofficial leadership proved helpful most of the time.

However, there were a couple of issues that arose over the next few months. First, she regularly wore clothes that fell well short of modesty. That wasn't uncommon among the young adults in our ministry, but she was the first one in a leadership capacity who had exhibited this behavior. Second, she interacted with her husband in ways that made others very uncomfortable. She often sat on his lap and paid more attention to him than whatever else was going on (to put it politely). I'm all for husbands and wives pursuing each other, but when their antics become the focus of the group and make it difficult for people to pay attention, something has to be done.

By nature I loathe confrontation. Over years of ministry I have improved, but this was my first time confronting someone in a substantial way in my role as pastor. I set up a meeting with this young woman and began nervously counting down the days. Before our meeting, I spoke with a couple of trusted advisors and rehearsed what I would say. Finally our meeting day came, and the moment she entered my office was one of the most nerve-racking I can remember. After a few minutes of small talk, I pressed play in my mind on my rehearsed conversation. I envisioned a good dialogue ending with her happy willingness to make some changes in her behavior. To my surprise, that's not how it went. She made it brilliantly clear that she did not want to make any changes.

The number-one thing I learned that day: when we confront small-group leaders about issues in their lives, and they refuse our help, it can be difficult to know how to react. However, it is important that we react well.

Don't Ignore It

In the church where I'm currently pastor, we had a leader who periodically came to meetings and Sunday services with alcohol on her breath. She was very passionate and did a lot of great things in her role. I tried to bring it up a couple times and she deflected my questions. She clearly didn't want any help. For a number of months, I found ways to convince myself that I wasn't really smelling alcohol—maybe it was just perfume. I stayed busy with other things and distracted myself from the issue. That was absolutely the wrong thing to do. Eventually one of our other leaders said something to me about it, making it impossible to ignore.

When you identify a leader who has a problem, you cannot ignore the issue, even when the person rejects your help. Eventually the issue can have horrible consequences for your church, the leader's small group, and the leader. At best, leaders who refuse help will undermine their own leadership; at worst, they will destroy your church's reputation. Being a good pastor sometimes means doing things that are uncomfortable. When a person resists your help, you must push forward into the uncomfortable space of confrontation. Don't ignore it.

Be Persistent

When someone is resistant to help with a problem you've identified, you have to be persistent in pursuing them. This will lead to one of two outcomes. The first outcome is a positive resolution. The person may have been resistant because they are embarrassed or internally wrestling with God's Spirit over it. In time they reach a point where they are ready to engage you. The seriousness of the problem dictates the amount of time you can take in dealing with an issue. When a leader misses a few required meetings, you can be lovingly persistent and take a few months to deal with it if necessary. When a leader is doing something direr, like having an affair, you must push them more quickly. In many cases, loving persistence will lead to a positive outcome. This is especially true if you help people understand you want to work with them, not chastise them.

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The second thing that can happen will leave the issue unresolved. If the leader gets so annoyed or angry that he or she blows up, there's little hope that the leader is ready to listen and work through the issue at that time. The person may just hope it will go away and that you'll stop talking about it. But ignoring the issue is not an option for the leader's health or the health of the small group. No matter the outcome, you must be persistent.

Push to a Decision

At some point you have to push your leader to a decision—either engage you on the issue or step out of leadership. This doesn't mean that leaders have to work primarily with you to solve the problem. They may feel more comfortable working it out with someone else—another pastor, a counselor, or a godly friend. It matters less who they are getting help from than that they are getting help. If a leader is persistent in fighting you and refuses the help, you will need to ask the leader to step out of leadership.

The exact character of this decision can vary based on the issue in the leader's life. For instance, a leader is struggling with an unwillingness to forgive another person in the church could agree to meet with you to pray for a heart-change. At some point the leader will need to be willing to offer forgiveness, but choosing to enter into a process that leads to forgiveness may be enough to allow him or her to continue in leadership. At other times that may not be an option. A leader who refuses to come to essential training times may need to choose to begin coming immediately or step down from leadership.

It can be difficult to determine the point at which you must force a decision. Seek the wise counsel of a few people you trust, such as other church staff or your small-group pastor if you are a coach. Depending on the structure of your church, this may be the kind of situation the elders should handle.

Sometimes It Blows Up

No matter how carefully and lovingly you handle the situation, there are times when it will blow up. That's what happened with the woman in our young adult ministry. She stormed out of my office crying. She refused to answer my phone calls and e-mails. On the other hand, she did talk to others in the group to let them know how horrible I had been to her.

I felt a number of emotions. I was angry that she told others things about me that weren't true. I was disappointed that we weren't able to work things out and continue ministry together. I was sad that in the church this was how this situation would end.

When a bomb blows up in a battle no one has control over where the shrapnel goes or whom it hits. When things blow up with a leader, it's not much different. The potential for a blow up makes handling the situation with integrity and love essential. Then when things blow up, you will know you handled it to the best of your ability and will have no regrets. When a situation with a leader blows up, resist the urge to defend yourself too much. You may be forced to do that some, but if you have handled things with integrity, most people will see that. Do pray for the person who chooses to handle things poorly. God loves the person, who may be hurting the self more than anyone else.

A very important step is to allow yourself to move on. Depending on your personality, this could be very difficult for you. It can be difficult not to take the situation personally. It is completely natural to need some healing after a negative interaction, so allow yourself to heal and then move on. After the woman left our young adult ministry, it took me a few months to really get over it. For a short period of time I allowed that situation to handcuff me in the ministry God had called me to. I was reminded by some close friends that I still needed to be faithful and move forward in the ways God was leading, even as I dealt with my own emotions.

Remembering the Goal

It is easy to get bogged down dealing with leaders who are resistant to help. It is very important to handle these situations well, but God has called you to more than that. He has called you to proclaim the gospel, lead others to do the same, and develop small groups that will make disciples of Jesus. This is a high calling, and you cannot allow yourself to be diverted from that important task.

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Also, remember that your goal with the resistant leader is not to get the person to comply with your leadership standards. Instead, it is to see someone be the person God wants him or her to be. That sounds like a cliché, but listen to these words from Paul in Colossians 1:28: "He [Christ] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." Work with the resistant leader in a way that will lead that person to full maturity in Christ. Sure, it may blow up, but in the power of the Holy Spirit you may also see amazing transformation that makes the person a better leader than ever.

—TREVOR LEE is pastor of Mountair Christian Church in Lakewood, Colorado; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Sometimes confrontation goes seriously wrong. When have you experienced this, and how did you respond?
2. Do you tend to want to ignore issues or jump in before praying about it? Why? What might be the consequences?
3. Do you tend to take these blow ups personally? Why? What can you do to heal from blow ups?

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When a Group Leader Is Addicted to Pornography

Promoting healing and restoration

By Rick Howerton

It can be shocking to learn that a leader is in the midst of addiction. Stigma and fear surround the issue. Unfortunately, addiction is all-too-common, and addiction to pornography is probably more common in your church than you realize.

A [ChristaNet poll](#) recently discovered that 50 percent of Christian men are addicted to pornography. Perhaps even more startling, though, is that the same poll found 20 percent of Christian women are also addicted. While once thought to be only a men's issue, addiction to pornography is clearly becoming a women's issue as well. Together, this means that roughly a third of our church members are dealing with this issue. Sadly, this means that there is a good chance that you will encounter this in your leadership.

So what should you do if you find that one of your small-group leaders is addicted to pornography? We must remember that the work of Christ, and therefore our mission, is restoration. Restoring someone who is addicted to pornography is the only and best option. When the Bible specifically tells us what to do, it is not only our best option, but also our obligation. And the Bible does speak to this situation. Paul wrote, "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Galatians 6:1).

When it comes to addiction, the small-group leader is not dealing with the effects of a poor decision, a misunderstood dereliction of duty, or a one-time experience with a fantasy sought out on a computer screen. He or she is held captive by the enemy and needs to be freed. Remember, when Jesus was first asked why he came to earth, he quoted this verse: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1).

The real question we must answer is, "How do we work in tandem with God to restore this person to be the emancipated creature God created him or her to be?" Some specific steps are effective and appropriate. First approach the leader and speak the truth in love. Let the leader know that you are aware of the situation and that you would like to work together to overcome this sin. Present a clear plan and discuss it together. Find out if the leader is willing to commit to the requests you are making.

This is the process for restoring your leader gently:

1. You will be relieved of your duties as a small-group leader so you can focus on the healing process.
2. You will join an addiction support group and/or see a Christian counselor who can help you.
3. If you see a counselor rather than join a support group, be willing to get together with a group of same-sex peers weekly for encouragement, prayer, support, and accountability. This will also be the group of believers you will confess this sin to. Remember that confessing your sin is vital to the healing process. James told us: "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).
4. Remove sources of temptation by agreeing to put software on your computer that will block all questionable images and websites.
5. Be willing to call me anytime you are tempted in this way. (If you are of the opposite sex, enlist a same-sex leader to offer this.)

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Here are some other issues you might be wondering about at this point:

1. *Should the leader continue to attend the small group he or she was leading?* Only if the group is willing to encourage this person through the process. If this is a couples' group, the spouses' feelings should also be taken into consideration.
2. *Should the pastor be told about this?* Yes. A person the church leadership has given authority to is dealing with a difficult life issue. The pastor may want to be there to encourage and offer care through this process.
3. *Should this person ever be in leadership again?* If grace is real and full restoration is possible through Jesus Christ, and I certainly hope you believe this, it is possible to restore this person to leadership.
4. *How long should the break from leadership be?* As long as it takes for this person to find freedom from this sin. When the counselor, family, and support group see real change and believe true healing has taken place, this person can return to leadership. The leader can be placed in an apprentice role and then restored as a small-group leader when you are confident the leader is ready. Leaders who have been through the process of restoration will be better leaders than they were before!

—RICK HOWERTON is the Global Groups Environmentalist for NavPress Publishers and [a regular blogger](#); copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Have you ever had to remove a leader due to addiction? How did it go?
2. How well do you seek to restore leaders? What might you do to improve in this area?
3. Does your ministry have a set process for restoring leaders? If not, what things should be included?

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When a Group Leader Promotes Heresy

Whether it's intentional or not, it must be addressed

By Joel Comiskey

In 1976, I was living in downtown Long Beach, California, and attending a Foursquare Church pastored by Billy Adams. Some friends invited me to attend their small group, which met close to the church, and I remember the leader teaching on a new gnostic way of looking at Jesus. He didn't believe in the deity of Christ, as far as I can remember. The next Sunday, however, I went to the Foursquare Church and heard Pastor Adams warn against this particular group and their false doctrine. I was a new believer at the time, and I remember feeling so grateful that a mature man of God had protected me from the heresy expounded by this errant small group leader. Suffice it to say, I never returned to this particular small group.

Paul said to the elders in Ephesus, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:28—30).

Elders, pastors, and coaches are called to protect the sheep from what Paul calls "savage wolves." Paul's descriptive language highlights how dangerous false doctrine is. For Christianity and its followers, the distortion of truth is a matter of life and death. A person can go to heaven or hell depending on his or her belief system. Correct doctrine, therefore, has eternal consequences.

Small group leaders within a local church have permission from the senior leadership to handle God's inerrant Word. They are mini-pastors, under authority. As a coach, perhaps you've heard some rumors swirling around about heretical teaching. What should you do?

Determine the Gravity of the Error

The word *heresy* originally meant "choice." It referred to a controversial or novel change of ideas or beliefs that contradicted the established dogma or teaching. On a positive side, it's good and right to challenge tradition, the status quo, and legalism. But, there's a fine line. When a person starts contradicting Scripture, it can have eternal consequences.

It's important for the coach to determine whether the leader is simply challenging the status quo or promoting poisonous doctrines. The small group leader, for example, might have only tried to explain the Trinity and failed miserably. Perhaps the leader attempted to answer a question about works versus faith but made it seem like good works save us. Or maybe he or she mentioned a book that questions the existence of hell without really believing what it teaches. A member of the group may have misunderstood the teaching and spread a false rumor about the leader's teaching.

On the other hand, the leader might be proactively teaching that Jesus isn't God, that the Holy Spirit is just a force, or that hell doesn't exist.

Go to the Person

The small-group leader's coach needs to discover the facts. The coach must go to the leader to find out what is actually being taught and what the leader believes. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus instructs us to first go to the one who has sinned against you. If a small-group member believes the leader is teaching heresy, it's a great idea for the member to go directly to the teacher. However, since heretical teaching is also a public sin and involves the church of Jesus Christ, the small-group member might first go to the coach or pastor because others have already been negatively affected. Even if a group member comes to the coach or pastor first, it may be a good idea to suggest that the group member go first to the leader to model Jesus' teaching on conflict resolution. The coach or pastor must follow up with the group member, though, to see how the conversation goes and whether or not another conversation needs to take place with the coach or small-group pastor present.

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On the other hand, if it is clear that the group as a whole has been affected, the coach should step in as soon as possible.

Act Quickly and Decisively

After talking to the leader, the coach might determine that the leader acted innocently, made a simple mistake, and is fully willing to repent of the damage caused. The coach might ask the leader to apologize to the group and then to clarify the mistake. In such cases, the coach might also require the leader to follow a church-sponsored small-group curriculum (rather than one of the leader's choosing), complete required church training, and receive more rigorous coaching.

If the coach determines, however, that the leader believes and is proactively teaching errant doctrine, more concise action will be necessary. First, the coach should speak to the small-group pastor about the situation, and they should reach a team decision. Satan can use this false teaching to destroy and divide God's flock. You will have a better chance of victory if you stand against the false teaching as a team.

Second, the leader should step down from leadership. I would not only ask the leader to step down from small-group leadership, but also ask the person not to bring up the topic again. Protection of the flock is paramount.

Can the Person Continue Attending?

If the person repents and renounces the false doctrine, you might allow continued attendance to Sunday services and even a different small group (with a commitment never to bring up the teaching again). I don't think it's wise for a removed leader to attend the small group where the heretical teaching occurred. Additionally, it is important that the small-group coach or pastor monitor the person for a time to be sure there are no concerns to address.

If concerns must be addressed more than twice, it's best to ask the person to leave the church. Paul says in Titus 3:10, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him." There is a place for warning, repentance, and restoration. However, the coach or small-group pastor needs to be very watchful that the teaching doesn't spread.

Preventing Heresy

Heresy can be avoided, and coaching and training are key preventives. Here are some things you can do to prevent it:

- *Pray.* Scripture is clear that we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against spiritual wickedness (Ephesians 6:12). The root of heresy is demonic. Churches that dedicate themselves to prayer will place around themselves a wall of protection against heresy.
- *Connect the group lesson with the sermon.* Many small-group-based churches around the world connect the pastoral sermon with the lesson during the week. One of the key strengths of this method is that it helps to avoid heresy and maintain solid doctrine.
- *Teach the material to leaders beforehand.* Some small-group pastors ask coaches to go over the lesson with the leaders before they bring it to their small groups. This is a great way to clarify doctrinal points and how to apply them.
- *Receive reports.* Holding small-group leaders accountable through regular reporting is a great idea. Reports help the leadership team know what material the leader has covered each week.
- *Require training.* Most small-group ministries ask potential leaders to complete specific training before becoming leaders. This training might last four months to one year. During this training process, the potential leader is under the watchful eye of a seasoned leader or coach and also is attending a small group. The potential leader is not only receiving biblically based knowledge, but also learning under the watchful eye of a small-group leader. This process helps churches to raise up leaders who are walking in holiness and believe sound doctrine.
- *Coach proactively.* Coaching is the key to protecting the flock. Coaches should keep their ears open to member feedback. Visiting groups on a rotating basis is a proven way for coaches to keep their ears open to the possibility of heresy. Visitation is like preventive medicine. A coach probably will pick up the seeds of error much sooner when regularly visiting groups.

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I'm grateful that Pastor Billy Adams helped me avoid the errant teaching of a small-group leader. Pastor Adams had the responsibility, like all small-group pastors and coaches, of protecting the sheep. Through preventive measures like prayer, coaching, and training, heresy can be avoided altogether. And being aware of your leaders and groups will help you become aware of heresy if it occurs and take appropriate measures to bring the leader and group back on track. Our powerful God will give you the ability to effectively handle these difficult situations.

—JOEL COMISKEY is founder of the [Joel Comiskey Group](#) and author of numerous books, including *The Relational Disciple*; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Have you faced this issue before? How did you handle it?
2. What things does your ministry have in place to prevent heresy in small groups?
3. Does your ministry have a policy on how to handle accusations of heresy? What might need to be part of that policy?

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When It's Time to Discipline a Group Leader

Here are three important steps that can make a tough task more effective.

By Danny R. Von Kanel

Standing in front of a room full of senior staffers, I asked, "How many of you like to correct your small-group leaders?" Silence; no hands raised. Standing in front of a group of small-group leaders, I asked, "How many of you enjoy being disciplined?" Silence; no hands raised. And that's no surprise. None of us like to be connected with correction. But coaching small-group leaders absolutely requires that corrective action be taken in certain situations. The key is knowing how to give corrective discipline that remedies the problem and salvages the leader.

As coaches, we correct best when we follow these three principles: accept and implement the biblical model, approach the group leader with "I feel" statements instead of "You" accusations, and apply mistakes made and solutions gathered using "could it be" questions.

Accept and Implement the Biblical Model

Here's what God's Word says on the subject of correction: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15–17).

That's pretty clear. Go to him or her—but before you do, call and set up an appointment at a time that is convenient for the leader. Ask the person to come to your office. Never correct in front of a group or within hearing distance of group members. Initially, meet with the person in question by yourself, unless you feel the person is prone to misuse, misunderstand, or distort what you say and how you said it—in that case, have a coworker meet with you on this first visit. If, over a period of time (usually a month), the issue has not resolved, reschedule another appointment. This time, do include another co-worker. If that doesn't resolve the concern, bring it to the church's attention. Such drastic action should happen only with issues of major consequence. Teaching false doctrine or heresy would fall in this category.

These meetings should include the following:

- Prayer, both opening and closing. Open to ask for God's wisdom, and close to thank God for resolving this issue in accordance with his will.
- Sit directly in front of or to the side of the group leader. Never sit behind your desk.
- Affirm the leader's contribution. Be kind, considerate, and to the point. State the issue as early as possible in the meeting. Allow feedback to assess how the person perceives the problem. He or she may have information you don't.
- Steer away from peripheral issues unless they directly impact the problem under discussion.
- Emotions may surface throughout the discussion; shift some of that by sharing how you feel.

There are three problems that should require an automatic suspension of ministry at that first meeting: child abuse allegation (in which case most states require notifying authorities), sexual abuse accusation, and threats to harm another person. In these situations, the group leader needs to take a leave of absence until the accusations can be investigated.

Use "I Feel" Statements Instead of "You" Accusations

Whenever you talk to a group leader in a corrective setting, consciously try to use "I feel" statements—things like, "I feel disappointed that you've chosen to ignore our policies in this regard" or "I feel angry because you

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violated confidentiality." Such declarations help connect the person with your feelings and allow for serious reflection.

When you use "You" accusations, however, they put the person on the defensive and almost always cause them to rebel at any correction. For example, compare the statements above with the following: "You chose to ignore our policies." "You make me angry because you violated confidentiality in your group." See the difference? Especially avoid statements such as "You messed up," "You destroyed unity in the group," or "You are to blame for people leaving the group." These only rev up the rhetoric, and don't really address the leader's mistake or failure.

If you're not familiar with using "I feel" statements in conversation, you may want to practice with a coworker before meeting with the group leader in question—especially if you struggle with sharing your emotions. Having empathy is important to understanding why a person did he or she did.

Consider using the following technique to probe the "why" behind your group leader's mistake, and to begin identifying solutions going forward:

1. Ask the person to share what resolution he or she wants for this problem, action, mistake, or accusation.
2. Ask, "What emotion were you feeling when the situation occurred?" This helps a person sort through the emotions behind actions.
3. Ask, "What are you presently doing to get what you want in regard to the resolution of this problem?"
4. Ask what the person will do next time an issue like this arises. (The person most likely will know the correct response, but give some possibilities, if necessary.)

Use "Could It Be" Questions to Work on Application

Questions asked from a "could it be" perspective offer group leaders a way to state their mistakes less dogmatically and involves less of a blow to the leader's self-esteem. For instance, instead of saying, "You messed up when you spread information that was told you in confidence," say something like "Could it be that the information told to you in our training meeting was best kept confidential?"

The first question creates walls of defiance. The second offers a possibility for action without condemning the leader. "Could it be" questions also can be used when developing solutions. For example, "Could it be that checking with me first is the best decision when you have questions about confidentiality?"

When correcting or disciplining small-group leaders, also take into account the following:

- Treat every group leader as you would want to be treated if you had messed up.
- Tame the anger within you. Never address a leader's failures when you're mad. Keep in mind these Scriptures: Ephesians 4:26; Proverbs 13:10; 28:25.
- Test the word of testimonies. Eyewitness accounts can be bogus.
- Tackle conflicts when you're rested. You will be emotionally exhausted after addressing the issue, so make sure your body is ready to take on the stress.
- Tread softly. More damage results from mishandling a leader who is loved by group members than any one minor offense for which the leader is guilty.

Someone must correct errant small-group leaders. Unfortunately, that someone is you. But consider the perk involved: Who else gets to do this in a Christian setting? Just imagine saving a fruitful leader who, by correcting mistakes, becomes a champion for the gospel for the rest of life. What a challenge! What an honor! May God use you to perpetuate positive discipline and correction that results in amazingly restored leaders.

—DANNY R. VON KANEL; copyright 2009 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Have you ever been disciplined by a church leader? Have you disciplined someone else as a church leader? What happened?

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2. Which of the principles listed above seems easiest to carry out?
3. Which one seems hardest or most frightening?

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Guidelines for Speaking the Truth in Love

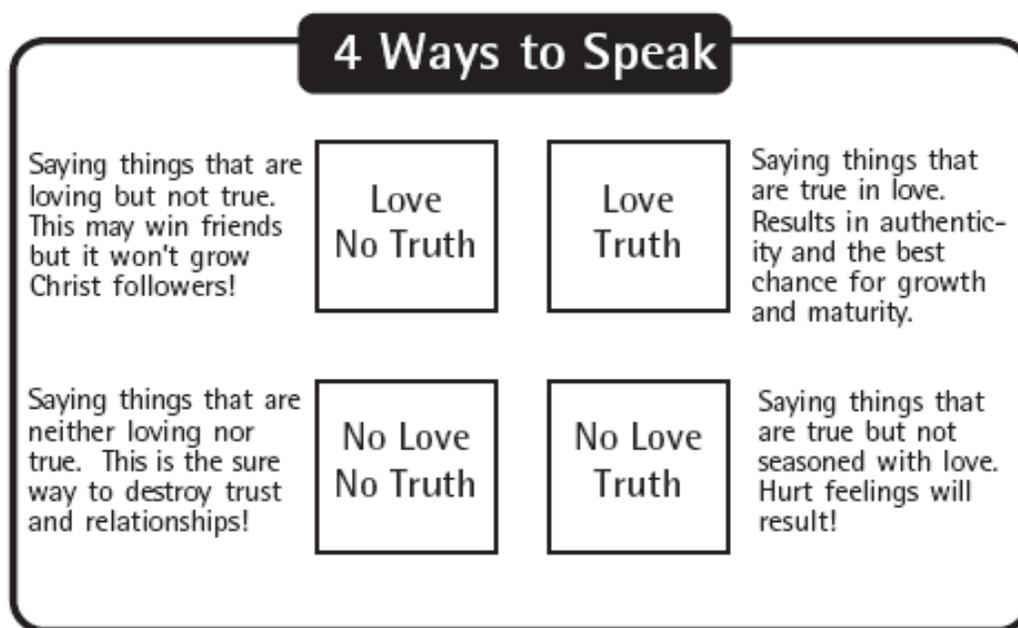
Practical advice for your most difficult conversations

By Community Christian Church

"Speaking the truth in love" can be the hardest part of coaching. If a leader isn't carrying through with his or her responsibilities, it is the coach's responsibility to speak words of truth. When something in your leader's life seems questionable, or when your leader is unaware of a personal weakness or problem, God may desire for you to be the voice of truth in that leader's life. Speaking the truth in love will enable your leader to take another step in his or her journey towards maturity.

In the same way, failing to speak these words of truth might keep your leader from growing and prove problematic or dangerous for your team and the people entrusted to that leader's care. Truth speaking is hard. There is no way around that. But it is something a coach must do for the good of the leader and the ministry.

As you navigate relational encounters with your small-group leaders, it's helpful to keep the following diagram in mind:



Tips for Speaking the Truth in Love

- **Pray. Pray. Pray!** Do not enter into a truth-telling conversation without praying for God to prepare your heart and the heart of your leader for the meeting. Pray for wisdom and discernment to speak the right words. Pray that your leader's heart will be receptive to correction.
- **Struggle.** If it is easy for you to speak hard words into another person's life, you probably shouldn't do it. If it is difficult for you to speak hard words because you don't want to hurt the other person or ruin your relationship, then you probably are speaking from a heart of love.
- **Decide** that you love the person enough to not allow anything to stunt their growth as a Christ follower. Gently affirm to your leader that the words you are speaking come from a desire to see that

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leader grow.

- **Ask questions** that communicate that you care about your leader—you're not just performing a ministry task or solving a problem. For example: "I've noticed that you don't seem to be serving with much enthusiasm lately. Is there something going on in your life that is burdening you?"
- **Affirm** your leader continually throughout the conversation. Affirm your desire to maintain a close, authentic relationship with that leader. Affirm the leader's value to the team.

—Adapted from the *Coaching Guidebook*, copyright 2007 by [Community Christian Church](#) and the [NewThing Network](#). Used with permission.

Discuss:

1. When was the last time someone "spoke the truth in love" to you? How did it feel? How did you react?
2. Do you find it easy or difficult to speak hard words to your leaders?
3. Of the tips listed above, which do you do well? What steps can you take to improve your areas of weakness?

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When You Need to Remove a Group Leader

While difficult, sometimes it needs to be done for the health of the leader and ministry.

By Thomas G. Bandy

I need to address a lurking lie that many pastors and coaches have started to believe. It hinders our ministry, makes us feel powerless, and racks up hours of our valuable time as we try to fix the situation. Perhaps worst of all, though, is actually believing the truth—because then we might have to do something that's a little uncomfortable.

Contrary to popular belief, it *is* possible to fire a volunteer. Not only is it possible, but sometimes it is necessary in order to protect the credibility and reputation of your church, and crucial to protect the flock. It may sound “uncharitable” to the small-group leader, but you need to protect the vulnerable people of a small group, and reassure people that your small groups are safe and healthy places. Jesus often spoke of the accountability of Christians to God and each other (e.g. Mat. 18:15-17), and his parables underlined the need to dismiss managers who were ineffective for God's mission (e.g. Luke 16:1-13). Paul separated from John Mark for the sake of the mission (Acts 15:36-39), and challenged the wayward Corinthians to test themselves or be disciplined (2 Cor. 13:1-4).

Preparing Ahead to Lessen the Likelihood

Perhaps the most important thing churches must learn is that you can greatly avoid this situation by properly training all leaders and other volunteers. Anyone who has spent much time exploring SmallGroups.com should be aware of the importance of training. Many times when we think about training, we think only of training skills. Incompetency, however, is one of the least likely reasons you might ask a leader to step down. While skills training is important, your training must include your expectations about behavior patterns both in the leaders' personal lives and in leading their small groups, bedrock faith convictions that your leaders are expected to mentor, and policy guidelines they are expected to follow. Having the skills to lead a small group means nothing if the leader is not leading a life that should be passed onto group members.

The most common reason a church removes a small group leader is that the leader has somehow breached, subverted, or contradicted the core values and bedrock beliefs of a church. For example, one pastor discovered that a male small-group leader was simultaneously dating three women in his small group. That contradicted our core value for gender respect and was reason for immediate confrontation on the issue. Another small-group coach discovered that one of her leaders, who also served as an elder, was sharing confidential details from a board meeting. Not only was the trust of the board broken, but also the leader was promoting gossip, something that had been forbidden during small-group leader training.

The Importance of Consistent Communication

You might ask how these church leaders discovered these issues. Small-group pastors and coaches need to be in consistent contact with the leaders they oversee. They can rely on spontaneous feedback, but regular evaluation and review with small-group leaders is the key. Small-group coaches may visit the leaders' small groups a few times a year, meet with leaders one-on-one monthly, and hold refresher training sessions for leaders quarterly. As coaches meet with leaders, they can evaluate them on their alignment to the mission and vision of the church, their ability to model and mentor the values and beliefs of the church, their skills to guide spiritual growth, and their ability to work as a team. Nobody is perfect, so these check-in opportunities can be a great way to improve group leaders' abilities.

Putting Policies and Structures in Place

When I have had to remove someone from leadership, I have followed a set procedure. This procedure basically imitates the standard personnel procedures of health care, social services, and other non-profit organizations.

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- A Basic Training workshop sets the benchmark for small-group leadership, and introduces volunteers to the key values, beliefs, policies, and other expectations of the church for all leaders. This should happen before they begin leading groups.
- “Upgrade Opportunities” take place two or three times a year. Plus, coaches are always available for individual coaching. This keeps small-group leaders sharp and reveals emerging problems (usually before they become serious).
- The pastor, small-group coordinator, or coach keeps a confidential journal for every small-group leader. This journal maintains a running evaluation of a leader based on the following categories of credibility from my book [Spirited Leadership](#):
 - **Mission Attitude:** Enthusiasm and dedication to the overall mission of the church
 - **High Integrity:** Ability to model and mentor the core values and bedrock beliefs of the church
 - **Competency:** Skills required to encourage spiritual growth and quality relationships
 - **Teamwork:** Ability to work generously and cooperatively with others
- You must have a policy on how your church will handle problems that do come up. For us, a one-on-one interview with the small-group leader identifies the problem and provides a clear path to correct the problem. If the problem involves a breach in human rights, or civil/criminal law, the small-group leader usually is removed immediately. If the problem involves a mistake due to misinformation, a gap in skills, or poor mission attitude, the volunteer has a reasonable amount of time to correct the problem. Usually this is between one and three months under the supervision of the pastor, small-group coordinator, or coach.
- Provide opportunities with counselors, trainers, programs, curriculums, therapy, or continuing education as needed. These resources can help rehabilitate and retrain leaders. Volunteers know you seriously care about their growth and effectiveness if you subsidize at least part of the cost. And don't forget about your elders. They can mentor leaders on the mission of the church, study Scripture and doctrine with leaders to clarify values and beliefs, or meet with them to encourage them.
- If the small-group leader solves the problem within a specified time, then reinstate or confirm them in leadership. You want to do this with confidence so you can defend the integrity and effectiveness of this leader in case there is any question. Volunteers who overcome mistakes need to be affirmed unreservedly, and their own personal and spiritual growth celebrated. It is an example for all.
- If the small-group leader cannot or will not correct the problem within the specified time, the person *must* be removed. There should be no ambiguity. It doesn't matter if the leader is young or old, veteran or newcomer, or the first cousin of the best giver. As shepherd to group members, each leader must be held to a high standard in order to protect the flock.

High accountability is the mark of growing churches, and it is crucial for the success of a small-group-oriented church. All it takes for a church to lose credibility is for one small-group leader (or any leader) to be unaligned with the mission, untrustworthy in values or beliefs, chronically incompetent, or too prickly or unreliable in teamwork.

Traditional church members may be surprised by these higher standards of accountability, but new members and visitors will be greatly encouraged. They will be confident that your church is a safe and healthy place, and that they will indeed grow personally and relationally. Church members are looking for credible leaders to demonstrate how to faithfully follow God's mission and live a Christian lifestyle. To meet the need and effectively minister in Christ's name, churches must go out of their way to equip leaders to be extraordinarily authentic and effective, and to remove leaders who are not living up to the role.

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—TOM BANDY is the founder of www.ThrivingChurch.com; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. How much time do you spend in training skills vs. training on moral and behavioral expectations? After reading this article, do you feel your're spending your time correctly?
2. What are moral and behavioral expectations do you have for your leaders (whether or not they have been expressed in the past)?
3. Have you been afraid to remove a leader in the past? Why?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you minister to struggling leaders

Smallgroups.com We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Best Church Practices: Small-Group Ministry](#) (Best Church Practices)
- [Small-Group Coach Orientation Guide](#) (Orientation Guide)
- [Evaluations for Small-Group Leaders](#) (Assessment Pack)
- [Small-Group Evaluations](#) (Assessment Pack)
- [Coaching Small-Group Leaders](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Handling Conflict in Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)

BuildingChurchLeaders.com A website with a multitude of resources to do ministry well.

GiftedforLeadership.com A website ministering to women leaders within the church.

[Coaching Life-Changing Small Group Leaders](#) by Bill Donahue and Greg Bowman. Donahue and Bowman offer field-tested biblical advice on the coaching keys of modeling, guiding, envisioning, and equipping for those who minister to the needs of small-group leaders. (Zondervan, 2004; ISBN 978-0310251798).

[Walking the Small Group Tightrope](#) by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson. Learn to find balance so that your group will grow deep together. (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310252290).

[Coach: Empower Others to Effectively Lead a Small Group](#) by Joel Comiskey. A practical 8-lesson strategy for becoming an effective small-group coach. (CCS Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0979067914).