

Practical Ministry Skills: Improving Small-Group Accountability



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Improving Small-Group Accountability" by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM. Inspiring life-changing community. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you train and direct your small-group leaders and facilitators. The material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders, and has been selected by the editors of Leadership Resources at Christianity Today International.

The theme of this download is "Improving Small-Group Accountability." The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. They can be used as part of a training session for several group leaders, or as a way to encourage and educate people individually. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, to explore why some people avoid accountability relationships, see "Why We Resist Accountability" by Louis McBurney (p. 5–6). To learn about a new method of accountability, see Eddy Hall's article "Discipleship Triads" (p. 13–15). And check out "Gender and Small-Group Accountability" (p. 16–17) to see how authenticity and vulnerability work in men's groups, women's groups, and mixed groups.

Our prayer is that this material will help your group leaders and members find and maintain productive accountability relationships and spiritual growth.

Need more material, or training on another small-groups ministry topic? See our website at www.SmallGroups.com.

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The Goal of Small-Group Accountability

Why vulnerability and confession are key to spiritual growth.

Proverbs 13:20

In his book *The Safest Place on Earth*, Larry Crabb defines Christianity as a place where someone can hit bottom and be okay. Not that they made okay choices, but that the person is okay within the group. When someone hits bottom, does your group turn to them or away from them?

Creating a “safe place” where people can truly open up and share at a deeper level is an important step in developing real intimacy in small-group community. The beginning of this journey starts by allowing people to disclose parts of their personal story and being affirmed by their fellow group members. It is sharing from the light side of life and moving to our deepest needs.

But this is just the beginning. The authors of *The Ascent of a Leader* explain that there is a difference between disclosure and vulnerability. In disclosure, I get to decide what and how much I disclose. But vulnerability is allowing someone to know everything about me—good and bad, strengths and weaknesses. This is where I become totally open and vulnerable about my entire life.

The next step past disclosure is accountability. Accountability is the turbocharger for individual spiritual growth and group intimacy. Many of us say we want to grow spiritually, but we fall short mainly because we are not willing to become vulnerable with one or more people in our group.

Group Accountability

Here are some suggestions that can help build accountability into your small group:

1. Regularly divide your group by gender to allow members to engage in more intimate discussions.
2. Challenge each group member to seek out an accountability partner within the group (men with men and women with women). Base your selection on natural affinity. Whom do you enjoy being with? With whom are you at ease in your group?
3. Consider allowing time (about 10 minutes) for accountability partners to get together during selected meetings.
4. Encourage members to meet outside the group setting and discuss issues for which they need accountability.
5. Select accountability questions that relate to the following areas: your relationship with God, your relationship with your spouse, your relationship with your children, your use of time and money, moral and ethical behavior, and areas of personal struggle.

Here are a few sample questions:

- a. Have you spent time praying and reading Scripture this week?
- b. Have you compromised your integrity this week?
- c. Have you been above reproach in your financial dealings this week?
- d. Have you spent sufficient time with your family this week?
- e. Have you lied about anything we have just talked about?

Develop an accountability covenant. Agree to meet with your partner regularly and to answer one question in one of the areas mentioned above at each group meeting. (You select your own question, but rotate the question each week.) Agree to uphold one another in prayer each day until the group ends. Agree to listen to each other’s problems with your eyes and your heart. Finally, agree to a specific date when the both of you will either renew your covenant or end your accountability relationship.

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Remember—the goal of accountability is to increase your ability to bear fruit through an encouraging and challenging relationship with another brother or sister in Christ. “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20).

Confession

Too often we attend church services and small-group meetings with masks on, concealing our sinfulness from ourselves and the rest of the group. The church should be the one place where we are able to admit our imperfections—the place we feel we must not act perfect. That’s because the Bible confirms that “all are sinners.”

A hidden sinful lifestyle poisons a person from within. Unexpressed sin holds the person in bondage. Confession may be the key to taking off the masks. Does the word confession make you uncomfortable? Do you think only of priests in small, dark booths? True, we evangelical Christians are not “into” confession. But James 5:16 is pretty clear: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

Scripture emphasizes confession in other places, as well—from Adam to the Levitical priests to the psalmist to the prophets to the New Testament church. The best setting for learning about and eventually practicing Christian confession is in a small group. People are more likely to confess their sins among just a few people whom they trust, who can hold them accountable, and who can be held accountable.

This isn’t going to happen in your first meeting, and maybe not even in your twenty-first. Accountability and trust, the prerequisites to confession, take time. With these things in mind, here are five things you can do to make confession a natural part of your small group.

1. **Know one another.** Community building is an essential part of your group meetings. Icebreakers help here; so do application questions in the Bible study that ask people to share their opinions and feelings. As people get to know each other, they will be more comfortable with one another. Then they will begin to trust one another.
2. **Be vulnerable.** Usually the leader needs to open up his or her life before other group members will do the same. When you take off your mask, others will be encouraged to take off theirs.
3. **Be confidential.** Group members won’t share personal struggles and areas of sin if they think they might be blabbed outside the group. Be sure everyone knows that things said in the group are held in confidentiality. Remind them of this especially when a deep concern is expressed.
4. **Care for one another.** People will open up more when they are sure you really care about them. Be ready to help in times of physical, emotional, and spiritual need. People will respond by sharing their struggles with you.
5. **Hold each other accountable.** Accountability is a tough discipline. But we cannot do it alone. We need each other. At first, try holding one another accountable for being on time to meetings, then for disciplines such as personal prayer and Bible study. Then, as trust is built, initiate accountability for issues that deal with sin.

— MIKE SHEPHERD; copyright 2001 by the author and Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on SmallGroups.com.

Discuss:

1. Does our small group practice disclosure or vulnerability?
2. How can we make sure that accountability leads to spiritual fruit, not judgment or continued shame?
3. What has been my most positive experience with confession? How can we duplicate that in our small group?



Why We Resist Accountability

Here are four common fears that keep us from what we need.

James 5:16

I had nothing to hide. No reprehensible behavior I was struggling with, no glaring character defects. In fact, I was feeling pretty self-righteous. Doug Self, with whom I'd been meeting weekly for several years, and I were sitting comfortably in front of the fireplace at the Redstone Inn, enjoying our early cup of coffee as usual. We filled each other in on our week's events as usual. We enjoyed the peaceful ambiance as usual.

Then out of the blue, Doug said, "Louis, I have something for you from the Lord." That was not "as usual."

Doug proceeded to point out some ungodly attitudes in me that he'd been noticing. He had been hearing me be critical and unloving. Ouch! I knew what he was referring to. Frankly, I wasn't interested in re-evaluating my position or changing it, until Doug brought it up.

The encounter reminded me why we need accountability—and why we often resist it. We find accountability difficult for at least four reasons.

We Fear Rejection

"If you really knew what I'm like inside, you wouldn't want to be seen with me." I've heard that from countless individuals during my 25 years as a psychiatrist. At times, I've felt the same way. Fear of rejection often makes accountability scary. But the times I've come clean, no matter how hard, have led to acceptance and forgiveness rather than rejection.

One time, I had to confess to my wife that I'd become emotionally involved with a nurse during my internship. That stupidity could easily have ended our marriage. Only by God's grace and Melissa's remarkable forgiveness did we survive. If I had been open and honest with Melissa or somebody else during that time, the whole thing might have been avoided.

I feared that admitting the temptation and attraction would bring rejection. Instead, Melissa said, "Louis, I'm very hurt and angry. I don't understand how you could have let that happen, but I forgive you. I'll need time to rebuild trust, and I want you to know if that ever happens again, I'm gone!"

I believed her. That event helped me learn to have a commitment to accountability.

We Feel Embarrassed

The things I confess to Doug, I often fail at repeatedly. That becomes embarrassing. I feel convicted, get up the courage to confess, pledge to quit doing whatever it was, only to repeat the behavior.

It may seem trivial to you, but one such problem for me has been speeding. I have a heavy foot, and out here in western Colorado, we have miles to go to get anywhere (25 miles to the grocery store and post office). What makes it worse is that the speed limit on our winding mountain road is 30 to 50 mph.

I've grown convinced that driving 10 mph over the limit is wrong, particularly since our car is known by almost everyone in the valley. They know I'm active in our local church and espouse a conservative position. So I make and break and remake my commitment to drive the speed limit. That's embarrassing.

I've heard confessions from hundreds of people who have the same struggle, only in other areas: pornography, lustful thoughts, lack of spiritual discipline, loss of temper, emotional abuse of family members, stealing, lying, cheating on taxes. The list goes on and can become such an embarrassment that accountability is lost.

We Resent Control by Hostile People

I've been blessed by the loving people in my life: my parents, my wife, Doug, and many others have shown me grace. Being accountable to them has been *relatively* easy.

It's not so easy to submit to someone angry at you, however. The accountability process can be a healing experience. But if the group members are wounded and angry, accountability deteriorates into hostile oblivion.

We Don't Like Facing Our Negative Feelings

I'm a master at self-deceit. I can employ denial and projection so fast it would set old Freud's head shrinking. These psychological maneuvers are mostly unconscious. They pop up automatically when some uncomfortable feeling threatens to jump out of me. I don't like my anger or guilt or anxiety—these emotions just don't fit with who I like to be (or at least like to appear to be). My self-image is that I'm a gentle, open, gracious person who seldom has negative feelings. So I find ways to avoid dealing with them.

Denial is a nifty way. I am able to avoid the unattractive feelings so quickly that I'm honestly fooling myself. I can say, "I don't worry" or "I'm not angry!" I may be the only one who believes it, which is the real danger. Rationalization, however, is a conscious mechanism, so I can't claim innocence in employing it. I adroitly look at my situation and justify my behavior. Considering the situation logically, I convince myself that my attitudes or behavior are reasonable. In fact, they're admirable. Perhaps even godly.

Let me give you a rather personal example. When a new pastor came to our local church, he was enthusiastic and eager to prove himself. His stated purpose was admirable: "To grow us deeper spiritually, then let that spill out into our community in outreach." He wanted to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. I certainly couldn't disagree with that vision.

I must confess, however, that with my perception of our church having done just that for 14 years, I felt defensive. Rather than joining in his enthusiasm, I questioned whether our investment and level of spiritual maturity was being depreciated or denied. Changes that were suggested or traditions that seemed devalued loomed as personal attacks.

I knew my emotional response was exaggerated or unfounded. Yet there it was. I began to resist and resent many of the new directions the church was headed. The hard part was the clergy from other church who came limping into my office, reminders of how elders like me could inflict great harm—even destroy a pastor and congregation!

That's when Doug and the other members of my accountability group stepped in. They held up a mirror for me to see how unlike my self-image I was being. And I learned that accountability actually works.

— LOUIS MCBURNEY; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 1996 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss:

1. Have I ever felt rejected after sharing something personal during a group meeting? What made me feel that way? How can I avoid doing that to others?
2. How can our group limit the amount of embarrassment that comes when we are vulnerable about repeat failures?
3. What are some issues and behaviors that I generally tend to rationalize? How can I make my group aware of these tendencies?



What Makes a Group Safe for Deeper Disclosure

Three principles to keep in mind when you plan on breaking the surface.

Hebrews 2:17–18

There are prayer groups, Bible-study groups, short- and long-term groups, discipleship groups, fellowship groups, recovery groups, and more. You name it, and a small group can form around it. Of course, not all groups meet for the express purpose of deep sharing or wrestling with life and relationships. But a group with any kind of longevity will eventually have to face this question: How do we handle times of deeper disclosure?

This is an important question to answer, because how the group responds will either deepen trust between members and encourage further vulnerability—or make it very clear that “we don’t do that sort of thing here.”

The following principles will help your group become a safe place for deeper disclosure and growing authenticity.

Group Leaders in Touch with Their Own Stories

Before you can hear and respond appropriately to someone else’s story, you need to have grappled with your own. Did you even know that you have a “story”? Some leaders would like to think they carry no baggage, or that somehow they have made it this far untouched by life. But not understanding how our past impacts the present creates insensitivity that is rooted in denial. A leader who feels uncomfortable engaging someone in emotional pain or who is tempted to rescue others has not come to grips with his or her own pain and its redemptive purpose.

Hebrews 2:17–18 reminds us that we do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities: “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Brokenness does not come from minimizing the damage we have experienced in our lives; it comes from facing that damage and recognizing how seriously it has affected us. Recovering appropriate feelings with regard to our past is critical for the high-priestly work of leading a small group of people who can step into the light with one another.

Appropriate Responses to What Is Shared

Group members who are ready to share will test the water to see if it’s safe to talk about damage, doubt, failure, or weakness. Will they feel shamed? That will depend on whether there is a sense of emotional connection with their first trial balloon of disclosure. Other group members quoting verses, teaching “truth,” or anything else that feels like a quick fix will pop that balloon.

But when group leaders respond in ways that assure a person that he or she has been heard and respected—ways that remind the person of his or her true identity (an image bearer of God who has been harmed)—that person and others will feel safe to share more. Allowing people freedom to feel their pain is part of the healing process.

Second Samuel 13:1–22 shares the story of Tamar, the daughter of King David, who was raped by her half-brother Amnon. How would you respond to pain like this if you heard this story in your small group? The goals of good responding are to validate pain with empathy, to move into shame with grace, and to affirm dignity with truth.

A group responding to Tamar might sound something like this: “Oh, Tamar, how devastating to go from wearing the beautiful garments of a virgin princess to being violated, discarded, and silenced.” “Tamar, what a set up! You went to Amnon out of obedience to your father and compassion for a sick brother, and you offered him something good. What happened was not your fault.” “You were treated like a harlot, but that is not who you are. I sure wish you would have had a safe place to share your story, where the shame and disgrace could

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have been lifted off your shoulders and placed where it belonged—on those who used you, silenced you, and left you desolate.” “Tamar, you offered Amnon a wise option, and he was a fool not to listen to you. Now your voice has been silenced and foolishness persists.” “I wish your father had run to you, held you, wept with you, and listened to you. Your voice is precious to us, Tamar, and we do not want to fail to hear you.”

Committing to and Keeping Good Boundaries as a Group

Here are some boundaries that are particularly helpful when a group decides they are ready to pursue deep honesty with one another:

- Respect the process each individual uses to find his or her own answers. This means not telling people what they need to do, interrogating them, preaching at them, or trying to fix them. It means not pushing into their stories when it is clearly unwanted. It involves honestly working on the issues that come up in the group and talking about the group as it is experienced by group members.
- Share personally, working on your own issues with the group and using “I” statements to share feelings, insights, and experiences. Each person needs to take responsibility for their own thoughts, feelings, issues, and growth.
- Allow feelings to maintain their full weight. To do this, avoid minimizing hurts, explaining them away, ignoring them, or rescuing people from their feelings. Instead, focus on giving constructive feedback with grace and truth.
- Commit to maintaining the confidentiality of group members’ stories and experiences. You are the only one who has the right to tell your story. However, confidentiality does have limits. If a group member shares thoughts or plans of self-harm or harming someone else, then the higher value of preserving and protecting life takes over. There are also levels of abusive behavior that merit the breaking of confidentiality.

The purpose of community is to walk in the light with one another and expose to the light what is done in secret. The group can be a community that helps people face their damaging behavior and its consequences without abandoning them to their shame.

In his book *Soul Talk*, Dr. Larry Crabb points to a tragic failure of the Christian experience: “Most people go through their entire lives never speaking words to another human being that come out of what is deepest in them, and most people never hear words that reach all the way in that deep place we call the soul.... We almost never hear words that stir life within us, that pour hope into those empty spaces deep inside filled only with fear and frustration. We rarely hear words that draw our soul into the soul of another human being, and, together, into God.”

May that not be said of your small group!

(For an excellent handbook on helping groups reach their full, life-changing potential, I highly recommend that leaders study [Making Small Groups Work](#) by Henry Cloud and John Townsend.)

— MARK BONHAM; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Have I grappled with my own “story”? What pain issues do I bring to our small group?
2. When did someone offer me trite advice or solutions after I shared an area of pain? How did that make me feel? How can I prevent doing the same thing to others?
3. What steps can our group take to ensure that proper boundaries are in place when we do share at a deeper level?



Accountability and Transformation

Here's how to move from talk to walk in your small group.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

There is no doubt that small groups have great potential when it comes to personal spiritual transformation. Certainly, there are many people willing to share how their small group has brought them comfort, support, and encouragement. Indeed, relationships are more easily built in small groups than in almost any other church venue. However, things often get a bit foggier when it comes to facing this question: As a result of your small-group participation, are you a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ in your day-to-day life?

It is one thing to talk in your group about application as you study Luke 6:30 or Ephesians 4:26, but it is another thing altogether to put your heart where your mouth is—let alone your life. Walking the talk has never been easy, and just because you are a member of a small group doesn't mean that spiritual growth will automatically get easier.

On the other hand, when handled correctly, a small group is an ideal place to put feet onto all that talk of application. If you want to become a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ in your day-to-day life, there really are few other venues better suited. Small groups can provide the nurturing environment needed to allow the gentle breezes of accountability to blow through your hair and tickle your ears with just the right questions to help you grow more faithful on your life journey.

A New Look at Accountability

In a small-group context, accountability is nothing more than an opportunity to experience what could be called “guided reflection.” However, the word *accountability* has recently developed a lot of negative connotations. It seems that when most people hear the word, they tense up inside as if they are about to get a blow to the head. It can bring to mind images of sharp-eyed Bible police trying to catch us in the act of sin. That kind of “help” none of us need.

Instead, if we are going to grow in our faith, our small groups have to take seriously Paul's admonition to “encourage one another” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). When handled correctly, personal accountability in a small group context helps the participants reflect on their walk with Christ and encourages them to take the next step. To that end, there are a couple of important steps that can help our group members move from talk to walk.

The first step in any journey always seems the most difficult, and that is no less true when it comes to accountability—even accountability as non-threatening as what you are about to experience. Introducing small-group accountability questions is the step that will help your group members grow in their personal faithfulness more than almost anything else, but you will have to take the initiative.

Here is how it works. During the fellowship time in your small group—about the time the conversation drifts toward sitcom plots—turn to whomever is sitting next to you and ask, “So, what did you read in the Bible this week that intrigued you?” You will most likely get a blank stare. Most Christians in North America today are not actually reading the Bible much, so do not be surprised or disappointed if the response is something other than, “Well, I was reading in Jeremiah last week, and....”

No matter what the response is, do not criticize your group members. Do not lecture or even hint that they are less than faithful. Acknowledge whatever is said and then turn to the next person and ask the same question. Go right around the room. The conversation will probably include, “Well, I tried reading the Bible, but when I got into Leviticus, I got lost.” Or you may hear, “I just don't understand what I'm reading.” (When those come up, I ask around the group and see if others have had the same experience—and if anyone has a solution.)

Of course, someone is going to turn the experience around and ask you what you read this week that intrigued you. There are two schools of thoughts here. You can either tell them what you have been reading and what has intrigued you, or you can be like one of the group and admit to not having read anything or confess that nothing caught your eye. I recommend being honest either way.

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You have just taken the first step. You have introduced the group to a type of accountability that will help them reflect on their own practices. Of course, it is still just the first step on what will become a long journey. You have to keep going.

At the next meeting, when the conversation deteriorates to hunting for recipes, turn to the person next to you and ask, “So, what did you read this week in Scripture that puzzled you?” Do not be surprised if no one has read anymore than they did the meeting before. Most will be surprised you even asked again. As before, make no reprisals of any sort—not even a funny look. Again, questions may follow about the Bible or about how to read it. Make sure everyone gets the question lobbed into their court.

When you ask the question at the third meeting, you can bet that one or two people will have something to add to the conversation. They will have read their Bible, even if they did so just ten minutes before the group time. Let the group discuss any questions that come up. Do not be the expert, even if you are one. Instead, if a question comes up, ask everyone for thoughts or have the group look at a study Bible.

In my experience, by week four virtually everyone is reading their Bible in some capacity during the week. That means the conversations will start to include some real Bible study. Encourage it!

Asking the Right Questions

You may be thinking that the point of all this is just to get people reading their Bibles at home, but there is a lot more to it. Bible reading is just one step on the journey. Over the years, I have developed 15 accountability questions that I sprinkle throughout my group meetings, using no more than 2 or 3 questions at a single meeting. The key to success is asking the same questions at least 4 meetings in a row so that people get the idea that there is an implicit expectation that this is a normal Christian behavior. I’ve also discovered that using the Bible-reading question each week can take the place of a planned Bible-study curriculum, since the discussion will be directly relevant to the interest and needs of the group members themselves.

Below are what I call the Discipleship Development Questions:

1. What intrigued [confused, excited, challenged, puzzled] you the most in your Bible reading this week?
2. What is the most significant word/message you heard from God in your listening time?
3. How have you shared your faith this week? What was the result?
4. Whose life is different this week because of your witness to Jesus?
5. Who did you encourage in their faith journey this week?
6. How did the Spirit “break through” into your life this week in worship?
7. What good work did you accomplish in the name of Jesus this week?
8. How did you spend time reflecting on your spirituality this week? What new commitments did you make?
9. What does God want to do with your life these days?
10. Who have you been praying with this week?
11. For what in your life are you counting on God?
12. What decisions are you facing at work [home, school, etc.] for which you are seeking God’s direction?
13. What have you intentionally given up for the sake of the Kingdom this week?
14. Whose life have you intentionally touched in Jesus’ name this week?
15. What “acts of random kindness” did you accomplish this week in Jesus’ name?

I tend to lean heavily towards the top five questions for the first several months, since I have found them to be more foundational. By asking and answering a couple of these questions each meeting, group members get the idea that there is more to being a Christian than just going to church and small group. For years now, I have seen the members of small groups take significant steps in becoming more and more faithful in their “real” lives when they reflect on their personal spiritual practices as someone gently asks these accountability questions and encourages them toward faithfulness.

— BILL TENNEY-BRITTIAN; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What have my past experiences with accountability been like?
2. How can group leaders ask these questions without being judgmental? What other steps need to be taken?
3. Which of the questions above best apply to my current group? Which will I try at our next meeting?



Facing Shame Issues in a Small Group

Why some group members don't want to open up, and how to help.

Hebrews 12:12–13

Joe and Jane have found themselves in a small group that wants to start sharing more deeply, building authentic relationships, and developing true accountability. But even as the group leader makes the case for this kind of authenticity as a vehicle for spiritual growth, Joe and Jane both feel ill at ease with what the changes might entail. They, like many others, carry a deep dread of being known. They chose a large church so that they could melt into the crowd, but the church was high on small groups and it wasn't long before they were invited to participate in one by some well-meaning people they had begun to respect. Now they are beginning to dread what the acceptance of that invitation is going to cost them.

You might assume that we all share the same desire to be known and to engage in loving community. At our very best, when we are walking in harmony with our created design, this is true. But because we are all products of the fall, our default position is to avoid the pain that can easily come when we open our hearts to others. Prior experiences in relationships have taught us that it is very risky to be vulnerable and that loving community is an elusive dream. Internally, we often make a vow to never be hurt again. And we begin to deeply mistrust our hunger for relational intimacy.

The Reality of Shame

What could be going on for Joe and Jane? Somewhere along the way, they have had their eyes opened to their nakedness. Maybe it was rooted in the struggle Joe had with reading in elementary school—the teasing that came when he stumbled over words the other kids all seemed to know. Joe learned that the safest strategy was to lay low and avoid exposure, or else risk being seen as a fool. Jane's father made fun of her childlike naiveté to the point that she felt her judgment was flawed. That was reinforced through a sexual encounter in high school. Both Joe and Jane have sewn fig leaves to cover their feelings of shame and experiences of betrayal.

Shame is a murky awareness of being deficient or undesirable in the eyes of someone we hope might deeply enjoy us. We are sure we will eventually be found out. As a result, we begin to hate our longing to be wanted and enjoyed. Sooner or later God comes walking in the garden and asks, "Where are you?" He sometimes does that in the form of a small group that is determined to engage people in what they bring into their group and not ignore it. The next question is logical: "Who told you that you were naked?" This is the way God pursued Adam and Eve in their shame, and it's instructive for us. Following the path of shame exposes more than a story. Dr. Dan Allender points out that it exposes how we really feel about ourselves, what we demand of ourselves and others, and where we believe life can be found. It unearths the strategies we use to deal with a world that is not under our control.

It should be pointed out that there was nothing innately sinful in Joe or Jane's stories. They could not say, "God, forgive me for being stupid" or "Forgive me for being naïve." But trusting in the self-protective strategies they have created to cope with life is sin. It has become idolatry. Their shame is informing them of who they are, rather than their Creator.

It is easy for people caught in shame to commit to rules and systems of accountability. As long as they can perform, they can feel good about themselves. It might just be doable to earn your acceptance if you work hard enough! Shame-based people can be some of the busiest, hardest workers in Christian service. But, ultimately, unaddressed shame shuts God out, keeps inner lives secret, and results in more shame-producing behavior. It also becomes a way to hide addictions.

The way some groups think of "accountability" contributes to the problem. If accountability is reduced to reporting your failures and having others hold your feet to the fire, it is an incubator for guilt and shame. Some think that the shame of confession is what produces godly discipline. Far from it. Rather than produce self control, it actually drives negative behavior underground.

Good small-group accountability will look deeper at what is driving the behavior—what beliefs you have formed from your interpretation of life experiences. Group members will want to know your whole story, not just your current struggles. They will want to get involved not only in hearing confessions of failure, but in looking at the wound that makes it so difficult to walk in the first place (Hebrews 12:12–13).

The Value of Love

So what can a small group do for people like Joe and Jane? There is no greater antidote to shame than pursuing people in love—even when exposing sinful strategies. After Adam and Eve’s sin was exposed, God covered them with garments from the skins of animals he sacrificed. People in shame need someone to offer grace and re-clothe them with the dignity that God has provided.

The group can stand in as advocates for both grace and truth. Their compassion can make it safe for Joe and Jane to come out of darkness, because they are not deceived about their own sin. “Joe, it took a lot of courage for you as a young boy to come back to class after being made fun of. I would give that boy a purple heart!” “Jane, your father missed your soft, tender heart. His teasing drove you away and kept you from having a safe place to go when you needed to share what had happened.”

But the group must also be eager to encourage one another to walk in the light. “Joe, your withholding does not honor all that God has created in you and that you are capable of offering.” “Jane, I notice that you share deeply with the women, but with the men you give less. What needs to happen so that we do not miss out?”

Group leaders need to guard against allowing group members to respond to stories by rescuing people from their feelings. Some find it difficult to weep with those who weep. But many formative experiences have contained losses that need to be grieved. Not only were these experiences damaging, but they resulted in damaging ways of living for which the individual now needs to take responsibility. If he or she chooses to trust the group, they can find great help. The group can help them recognize and name the shame.

The group can observe them isolating in shame—or, as others sometimes do, overcompensating by dominating—and give gracious feedback. “Joe, can you tell us where you’ve been? We’ve missed hearing from you.” “Jane, we’d like to take five minutes to talk about what you’ve brought up. Is it okay if we hold it to five minutes by giving you a signal when you have one minute left?” Or maybe, “I’ve noticed that when you share, something takes over and it becomes hard to contain what is going on inside. Do you have any idea what that might be?”

How people’s shame is responded to by a group and its leaders will determine how deep they or others will feel safe to go. What would make it safe to share issues of shame in the first place? Group leaders set the tone. When leaders are in touch with their own brokenness and can talk openly about it because they have received help and healing, they create space for others to do the same. If people are not bringing up real struggles of the heart, could it be that they do not feel safe because it has not been modeled in the group?

We have been talking about shame over who I feel I am. But there is also legitimate shame over what I know I’ve done. It is not the goal of the group to talk people out of either kind of shame. Both expose what I am allowing to define me. In both cases, I have lost awareness of who I really am in Christ. Fortunately, once I have identified what is going on, I have the opportunity to go to the Cross and confess what I have believed. It is a beautiful thing when a group can go there together with one of their members, pour out their heart in confession, and, in exchange, have the righteousness of Christ poured out on them.

As a final thought, it could happen that someone will confess shame and, along with that, communicate a desire to do harm to themselves or someone else. Or someone could confess having committed a reportable offense. In either case, the responsibility of the group is to preserve and protect life. Get outside help. No group agreement of confidentiality supersedes this responsibility. Loving community will, however, walk with the willing through the darkness and into the light, wherever that leads.

— MARK BONHAM; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What parts of my life do I prefer to keep hidden away? Why? Is this a conscious effort, or automatic?
2. How would members of our group define accountability? How can we maintain a healthy view?
3. Do I set the tone for accountability and love as the leader of our group? How can I be intentional about doing so?



Discipleship Triads

The benefits of multiplying disciples three at a time.

Matthew 18:20

“I admit I stumbled onto the discovery; yet it has become one of the most amazing ‘ahas’ of my pastoral ministry,” writes Greg Ogden. For many years he had championed one-on-one discipleship—the Paul and Timothy model. Then came the experiment.

As the final project for his doctor of ministry program, Ogden was testing a discipleship curriculum he had written. At his adviser’s suggestion, he experimented with the curriculum in three settings: one-on-one, a group of ten, and a group of three. While all three settings produced growth, to Ogden’s surprise, the triad led to the greatest life change. “I did not anticipate the potency that would be unleashed in what I have since come to call a triad,” he says. “It would forever change my understanding of the means that the Holy Spirit uses to transform people into Christ’s image.”

Why Three?

Ogden wondered how adding just one person to the one-on-one discipleship model could change the entire feel of the relationship. Here is what he has come to believe.

- When a third person is added, there is a shift from the discipler as focal point to the discipler as fellow participant.
- There is a shift from a hierarchical structure to a relational structure.
- There is a shift from dialogue to dynamic interchange.
- There is a shift from limited input to wisdom in numbers.
- There is a shift from addition to multiplication.

This last point needs to be unpacked. In theory, one-on-one discipling should lead to reproduction. Once someone is disciplined, he or she should disciple someone else, creating a long chain of new disciples.

But Ogden admits that in practice, the reproduction rate was low. He now believes that this is because one-on-one discipling relationships tend to be hierarchical, and hierarchy tends to create dependency. Those being mentored see themselves as receivers, not givers. Ogden observes: “As long as there is the sense that one person is over another by virtue of superior spiritual authority, however that is measured, few people will see themselves as qualified to disciple others.”

What Do Triads Do?

A triad is a group of three people—usually all men or all women (same-gender groups tend to produce faster spiritual growth)—who meet regularly to share life, encourage one another, and pray for one another. Engaging in a form of Bible study is optional.

Even when triads do use curriculum, the study is not the group’s primary focus; the focus is relationships. Ogden makes a compelling biblical case that it is relationships, not book learning, that drives the process of transforming discipleship. Neil Cole’s Life Transformation Groups (see *Cultivating a Life for God*) are a form of discipleship triads where a heavy commitment to Scripture reading serves as the curriculum.

My triad meets for breakfast every other week for a couple of hours. Some triads meet weekly. Moms with young children can meet at the park or at a home while they watch their kids play. Exercisers can walk together, sharing and praying as they walk. I think it is important that a triad not fill up a “prime time” slot, such as an evening, as that makes the meeting too much of a time burden. You’re going to eat breakfast and lunch anyway. If you can meet over a meal, it costs you very little time.

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One purpose of a triad is mutual accountability. My own working definition of accountability is to be in a relationship with someone who knows me so well that I cannot screw up without his knowing it. A triad can become that kind of relationship.

“Fast Track” Small Groups

As a church consultant, it is not unusual for me to work with churches that need help with small groups. Our recommendations usually follow a typical pattern: that the church develop one or two prototype small groups, get outside training for small-group leaders, identify a qualified person to be the small-groups coordinator (paid or unpaid), then multiply the prototype groups after several months. Group leaders need a wide range of skills: facilitating meetings, leading worship, identifying and training apprentices, mentoring group members in evangelism, and so on. Such leaders are actually pastors, and it’s an exciting and high calling.

But growing that kind of small-group culture throughout a church usually takes years in the best of circumstances. When a church needs small-group help right now and it does not have leaders with the experience and passion to develop a traditional small-group ministry, we now recommend that the church promote discipleship triads.

Why? There are several reasons why triads are a great “gateway” into effective small-group ministry and accountability:

- **Starting triads is simple.** One person prays about whom to invite to join him or her, then extends the invitation. When inviting someone, I usually hand him *Transforming Discipleship* and ask him to read it so he understands the purpose and biblical basis of the triad.
- **Triads don’t require trained leaders.** By the time people have attended three or four triad meetings, they know enough to start another triad.
- **Triads need no administrative support.** A traditional church-wide small-groups ministry requires extensive administration and coaching, whether from staff members or a key volunteer. Triads are self-governing.

Synergy with Small Groups

The formation of discipleship triads or Life Transformation Groups is a proven strategy for church planting. Triads need not be limited to Christ-followers, but can include anyone who is serious enough about seeking God that they want to participate. Once several triads are formed, three or four can be combined into a small group or house church.

Triads can also be a powerful complement to traditional small groups. They are the best way I’ve found to address the ever-present small-group tension between outreach and community. Except for recovery groups or certain leadership development groups, I’m a big believer that small groups need to not only be open, but that they need to build intentional outreach into their DNA. Why? Because Jesus calls us to go and make disciples.

However, this limits the potential for intimacy. Every time a new member joins the group, the trust level must be rebuilt. And many open groups include a person or two whose presence requires you to guard your sharing. In 30 years of small-group life, about half of the groups I have belonged to have developed intimacy, and about half have not. Given the nature of open groups, I don’t expect that percentage to improve.

So, rather than being frustrated when my group doesn’t meet my need for a place to share intimately, what if I look to another setting—my discipleship triad—to meet that need? Then I’m free to make outreach a priority over intimacy in my group, knowing that my need for intimate sharing is being met elsewhere. If I also experience intimacy in my small group, I gratefully accept that as a gift.

If your triad members are from your small group, that creates a special synergy. When your small group meets, you are strengthening your triad relationships; when your triad meets, you are strengthening your small group. Far from competing with each other, your small group and triad build up one another.

Triad Multiplication

Since the goal in all types of discipleship is to produce new disciples, triads need to multiply. A typical life cycle for a triad is 18 to 24 months. The simplest way to multiply is for each member of a triad to invite two people to join them in forming a new triad.

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In some cases, that's the right option. But if you prefer (as I do) greater relational continuity, you can invite a fourth member to join the triad for two to four months. This time of pregnancy is temporary, since experience shows that groups of four are generally less effective than groups of three. After a brief pregnancy, the foursome divides into two groups of two, each of which invites a third person to join them. Thus, two new triads are born.

To close, if you're seeking intimate companions for authentic sharing and relationship, or if your church needs a simple, powerful way to inject new life into your small-group ministry, discipleship triads may be just what you're looking for.

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Discuss:

1. What is my current experience with discipleship? What have been the strengths and weaknesses of that system?
2. How could discipleship triads connect and enhance our current small-group system? What obstacles might have to be overcome?
3. What steps can our church take to assist the creating and multiplication of discipleship triads?



Gender and Small-Group Accountability

How accountability works in men's, women's, and mixed groups.

Genesis 2:18–25

Accountability has always been a key ingredient to a deeper spiritual life. Christians with a life worth emulating have grown in part because of their vulnerability—appropriately trusting other Christians with their toughest struggles and their greatest victories in Christ. Many have discovered a small-group setting to be ideal for this kind of life sharing.

Accountability, however, does not take on the same characteristics in every small group. Men's groups, women's groups, and mixed groups each have their own unique benefits and challenges.

Accountability in Men's and Women's Groups

My wife, Becky, and I experienced the differences between accountability in women's and men's groups through a discipling experience in our church. I began a men's discipling group for in-depth relationships, Bible study, and accountability. After we had been meeting for a few months, the wives of the men in my group observed positive changes in their husband's spiritual life and asked Becky to begin a similar group for them.

Becky and I compared notes as the life of each group developed. In many ways, the groups looked the same. But there were a few marked differences.

- **Relationship to the leader.** Becky noticed that the “position” (her word) of each of the ladies with her as the leader was important to them. In their own way, they would ask questions like, “How close is our friendship?” “Are we ‘best’ friends?” “Are we ‘just’ friends?” This priority on the part of the group members was both hindering and helpful to the discipleship process. While it placed additional pressure on Becky as the group leader, it also opened the door for meaningful, personal conversation with individuals in the group.

The men in my group, while desiring to build a closer relationship with me, weren't as concerned about where they stood with me personally as the leader, or how deep our friendship was in relationship to the other guys. They seemed more content to be just “a part of the group.” Of course, this also made it more difficult for me to build the kind of in-depth relationship with them that would lead to true accountability.

- **The gripe factor.** My experience is that men can be hard to crack. We don't naturally share personal things. We can talk about in-depth theological issues, or passionately discuss how to repair a toilet, but we have to be coached before we will talk about our feelings.

Becky's experience with the women was pretty much at the other end of the scale—her group members were sometimes a little too ready to share personal things. This made it easy for the group meeting to turn into a gripe session about husbands, children, in-laws, and so on. While I had to work on getting the guys to open up, Becky had to work on focusing the ladies on the next level of their spiritual walk.

- **Distractions.** Becky acknowledges that women feel a huge responsibility for their home life. They are often the ones making sure that the kids get nurtured, their husband's needs are met, and all the domestic details are in place, like the soccer schedule or the church program. As a result, they are more easily distracted from small-group meeting attendance, or from focusing on the meeting when they do attend. One of Becky's biggest challenges after a while was actually getting the ladies to show up with enough consistency for the group to function properly.

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While the guys are not unconcerned about domestic life, we compartmentalize more easily. We can leave behind the current home problems, escape into the men's group meeting for a couple of hours, and then switch it back on and engage again at home.

Awareness of these three differences in men's and women's accountability groups helped Becky and I lead in a way that produced maximum growth. For example, Becky recognized the felt need of the ladies to connect with her as individuals. While she was careful not to show favorites, she did try to meet with each of them regularly for lunch or an outing.

Another way that recognizing the differences in our groups was helpful was that I did not feel a sense of competition when Becky got her ladies to open up and share personal things so easily in the group meetings. I had to realize that this was a marathon, and that it was going to take a year or more of constant attention before the men in my group would share meaningfully.

One way that we dealt with the issue of distractions was to have the guys offer to take care of the kids on the night of the wives' meeting so that the ladies could be free to concentrate.

Accountability in Mixed Groups

Another small-group accountability setting that presents a unique set of challenges is the mixed small group, where men and women are in the group together. At another church, Becky and I were hosting a weekly young couples' small group in our home. We also both had been leading separate men's and women's accountability groups with other people who were not in the young couples' group.

As our couples' group moved into its second year, we began to ask whether or not the principles by which our separate men's and women's discipling groups operated was transferable to a mixed group. We asked the group to let us "experiment" on them, and they agreed. We made a few changes, such as: once a month we would get out of the living room and serve in the church or in the community; we began to take turns leading the lesson; we began to challenge ourselves with spiritual disciplines that were new to many in the group, such as memorizing Scripture.

In some ways, the mixed discipling group worked well and encouraged individual spiritual growth. However, we noticed that other aspects of accountability in the mixed group were not going well. In the end, it all came down to one main issue: men and women do not open up about personal things in mixed company as well as they do in groups where members are all the same sex.

Prayer requests were more "surface" in the mixed group. Bible studies didn't get down to the depths of where we really live—the dark parts in each of us that we hide most of the time. When we did serving activities together, it was harder to build meaningful camaraderie because the guys tended to like certain aspects of serving and the ladies another. And for fellowship activities, the guys preferred sports and hands-on outings, while the ladies liked shopping and conversation.

We tried the mixed accountability group for one year. When we felt it was not working, we went back to the more traditional mixed small-group approach. We did not feel a sense of failure—it was a fun experiment for all of us. But in the end, we had to acknowledge the differences between men and women when it comes to accountability.

— RICK LOWRY; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Do I agree with the conclusions about men's and women's tendencies in small-group environments?
2. How do these observations support what has been happening in our small group? How do they conflict with what is happening?
3. How can we use these observations to increase the effectiveness of accountability in our small group?



Addressing Pornography

Practical tips for helping those who are trapped in a deadly snare.

1 Corinthians 6:18

If someone in your small group is addicted to pornography or is habitually unable to resist temptation, there are several things that can be done to help. All of the steps below will be much more effective when accompanied by accountability relationships with caring and committed people.

Removing Sexual Triggers

The physical removal of all sexual and non-sexual triggers may be the most obvious action step a person can take in overcoming their addiction; however, it is perhaps the most difficult. It appears to be much less hassle to try to change how we think than how we live. But we would argue that if you don't change how you live—your physical environment and who and what is in it—all the efforts you may make to change how you think could be futile.

Removing your physical triggers is a personal thing—everyone's life is different. What could constitute a physical trigger would be anything that is or helps you get pornography, the environment that triggers it or allows for it, and friendships that support you in your using pornography. Does this mean that you need to get rid of your computer, move from your current neighborhood, or make new friends? That answer is up to you. But if you value your sobriety, and your lifestyle is causing you to crave pornography, drastic steps might need to be taken to remedy that situation.

Physical Removal of Pornography and Its Mediums

Your computer is the most obvious starting point in removing physical triggers. For most people who struggle with pornography, the computer is the central lever that controls not only the addiction, but also their entire lives. *Therefore, a man who is serious about overcoming his addiction, and ultimately serious about reclaiming his life and sexuality, must take the time and soul-searching necessary to honestly come to grips with whether or not this modern invention is improving his life and faith, or completely destroying it.*

Of course, many men rely upon computers for their livelihood. Getting rid of their computer, even for a season, may seem to be out of the question. This *is* a sticking point. But once again, there are some binary choices to be made here. Either you feel you can remain sober by keeping your computer or you do not. The goal here is your sobriety, not your job. But if you feel that with some help you can keep your computer and remain sober, there are some wonderful options and tools available to this end.

First, you can make some social and behavioral decisions to help keep you accountable online. This includes personal rules as to when and how you are allowed to use the computer. If using the computer at night causes you to be triggered, only use the computer during the day. If using the computer alone causes you to be triggered, place it in a location about the house or your workspace that is communal. Simply rearranging your computer screen toward your office doorway, for instance, might be enough of a deterrent (or reminder) to not look at pornography.

More potent tools that can prevent you from looking at pornography on the computer include blocking and accountability software. Blocking software, like Safe Eyes and Net Nanny, electronically prevent explicit sexual material from entering your computer. Accountability software, like xxxchurch's free [X3Watch](#), monitors which sites you visit and sends email reports every two weeks containing any questionable websites you have visited to two accountability partners of your choosing. Needless to say, this opens the door for some rather interesting conversations.

Getting rid of, or altering, the medium through which you view pornography is just the beginning of physical removal. Personal stashes of pornography—whether in digital, analog, or print formats—*must be completely and irrevocably destroyed*. Just throwing them in the trash is not sufficient. Not only do we want to remove this sin and temptation from our lives, but we also want to remove it from everyone's lives. Erasing, breaking,

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cutting, shredding, and even burning physical stashes of pornography are nice visual reminders to ourselves and those we love that *this* is how we value pornography. We hug, kiss, and encourage our loved ones; we stomp, crush, and destroy pornography.

Physical Removal of Unhealthy Environments and Friendships

For a man who is working to overcome an addiction to pornography, his environment could be his greatest stumbling block outside of the physical presence of pornography. Either his environment is physically exposing him to pornography, or it is causing in him the feelings that make him feel as if the only way he can deal with those feelings is by numbing his pain by using pornography. Remember, we are creating a victorious environment; we need to look around ourselves to see if we are honestly walking out our daily lives in a space that builds us up or tears us down.

The environments we inhabit daily are made up of both physical spaces and physical people. Both of these elements need to be working in unison to inspire us to at least discover God's purpose for our lives, and at most help us in living out our life's purpose. If our environment is not allowing us to do either of those things, it needs to be altered.

Some environments are just uninspiring to begin with. While some men may thrive off of dark and enclosed environments, others may not. The ensuing feeling of depression and isolation that may result from living or working in such a location may cause you to want to seek out a distraction for the moment. A better solution to this negative environment would be to actually change it. If you feel like your environment is causing you to use pornography, take the time *now* to physically change it. Change neighborhoods, change apartments, change wall colorings, or change your housekeeping habits. If your work environment is unsavory, change jobs, change offices, change shifts.

Often a physical environment can be perfectly agreeable and positive, but it is filled with people who are not. *It is essential to look at the people who are in your life and make decisions about whether or not they are healthy or unhealthy for you.* The extreme nature of an unhealthy friend or relation is anyone who either remains committed to using pornography and/or doesn't respect your desire to stop using it. You may have friends or relations who, while not actually using pornography, cause many of the feelings that lead you to using it.

While this may seem tricky, it is important for you to diagnose who in your life is healthy for your sobriety and who isn't—and then make decisions regarding changing, limiting, or eliminating your time with them. This is easier for some relationships than for others. It is relatively easy to redirect the conversations and activities of casual workplace acquaintances; it is much more difficult to do the same within a family situation or marriage.

The notion of changing, limiting, or eliminating unhealthy relationships can be complicated. Sometimes a person who is in an unhealthy relationship may not even know that he is in one, and if he *does* know that he is in one, he may not even have the first tool necessary to try to fix it. As a result of this confusion, he may continue to turn to pornography as an escape—a way to avoid the reality that things aren't healthy between him and his mother, father, sister, brother, or wife.

The specifics of repairing these relationships may be outside the scope of this article; however, it is not outside the scope to say that if a man is struggling with an addiction to pornography and his close personal relationships are damaged or damaging, he must take the time to repair them. There is no other alternative.

A good starting point if you are faced with a close relationship or marriage that is causing you pain is to openly confess to that person how you feel. If that confession is met favorably, then the two of you can begin to work together, or in conjunction with a therapist, counselor, or pastor, to seek healing. If your confession is not met favorably, still seek counsel from a therapist, counselor, or pastor. He or she will have ways to work through the challenges and issues you are personally facing. But once again, redeveloping and restructuring your personal relationships is a key part of your recovery.

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Discuss:

1. How active should our group be in determining which members (if any) are struggling with pornography?
2. With which of the steps mentioned above should a group help directly? Which steps should be private?
3. What steps can our small group take to provide positive relationships and environments for those struggling with pornography?



Accountability for Group Leaders

Three questions to help ensure that groups are functioning properly.

1 Timothy 3:1–15

“Keep it simple and supportive.” That’s the basic attitude when it comes to how small-group coaches and directors should relate to group leaders. But it’s often challenged by the seeming complexity and stress of leadership accountability. We are afraid to burden group leaders with bureaucracy in the form of reports, interviews, or extra meetings. We are also afraid to scare them to death with overwhelming demands for results (whatever they might be).

That’s why the simplest, wisest strategy for keeping track of group leaders is to plan three “upgrade coaching” events throughout the year. Simply gather small-group leaders for a day or an evening apart and address these three important questions.

Is the Group Operating Correctly?

First, is the small group operating within the DNA of the church? No matter what the affinity is about, are small-group participants learning and modeling the core values and beliefs of the church?

Core values are the positive, predictable behavior patterns associated with Christians that the Bible describes as the “fruits of the Spirit.” You know—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control, gentleness, and so on. Core beliefs are the deep faith convictions church people turn to for strength in times of trouble. The Lord is the Shepherd, God’s grace always wins out, repent and you will be rescued, fear not for God is with you, and so on. If people are behaving in ways that contradict or undermine these things, the small-group leader needs to intervene.

If the leader doesn’t know how to intervene, the upgrade coaching event needs to help them figure it out.

Is the Group Free of Control?

Second, is the small group breaking free from control? “Control” is the great enemy of small groups. Conflict can be tolerated, even used positively. Control is never tolerated.

Control is a form of co-dependency, so there are always two sides. On the one hand, there may be people in a small group who have an overwhelming need to tell people what to do, how to think, or what to feel. On the other hand, there may be people in a small group with an addictive need to be told what to do, how to think, or what to feel. If there is the one, there is almost always the other, and between the two personal growth and group trust fall apart.

To be frank, control is one of the most insidious diseases that affect the body of Christ. It creeps into all kinds of relationships. Control happens when an individual tries to shape the lifestyle and life purpose of others around their personal tastes, opinions, agendas, and priorities. Controllers are literally “full of themselves”; they view others as extensions of themselves. They often do this unconsciously, driven by their own insecurities, uncertainties, and inadequacies. Controllers are sometimes mean, but usually they are very nice!

You may be saying to yourself, “Why, some of my best friends are controllers! And because we love them, let’s just be patient and put up with their behavior.” Oops. Now I’ve become a controller, because I am suggesting that out of love for some nice, neurotic person, we should all surrender our autonomy and our individual quests for fulfillment. The small-group leader suddenly aids and abets control. Of course, the first mistake is in thinking that aiding and abetting any neurosis is love. It’s not. Helping someone remain a controller is a pretty mean thing to do, since they are sabotaging their own spiritual growth and relationship to Jesus by doing so. Breaking control is hard. That’s why they call it “tough love.”

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Small-group leaders look for signs of hidden intimidation or habitual timidity. Someone never speaks; someone else always speaks. One person's personality dominates the room; another hides behind the sofa. One participant always claims the last word; another always allows himself to be contradicted.

If the small-group leader can't intervene to break control, then the upgrade coaching event needs to help them figure it out.

Is the Group in Need?

Third, does the small group need anything? Rather than begin an endless list of possible things into which a small group might need to go deeper and further, we can simply identify four categories for continuing education:

1. Some group leaders need extra training in mission alignment. In other words, the group isn't clear about the overall mission of the church, or they are insensitive about the particular kinds of seekers out there and their needs. Bring the senior pastor to the upgrade coaching event to focus the mission.
2. Other group leaders need to be supported or challenged to model the high integrity of church in both leadership and daily living. In other words, group leaders should be paradigms of the kind of spiritual discipline and Christian lifestyle to which group participants aspire. They are models and mentors. Since nobody is perfect, bring people or resources to the coaching event that can help show them the way.
3. Still other group leaders need extra training in skills. Perhaps they need help in conflict resolution, understanding ADHD personalities, intervening in alcohol addiction, or whatever. Or perhaps they need extra training in Bible interpretation, intercessory prayer, or care giving. Again, bring in leaders, show videos, or read resources to equip them better.
4. Finally, some group leaders may need extra training in teamwork. Group leaders may themselves be too aggressive or preachy, they may be poor listeners, or they may not lead a fluid group process that honors timelines. Who knows? Encourage them to bring case studies, practice role playing, and help them learn how to build and grow a group with mutual support.

Upgrade Coaching

When you plan for these "upgrade coaching" events, there are several ways to focus the agenda. The group leaders themselves will help you do it through their needs, but you can also rely on general feedback from group participants, and even on a grievance process in the life of the church.

Notice that much of my advice about accountability refers to group leaders. If you are good at holding group leaders accountable, you don't need to worry about keeping a group accountable. The leader will do that.

Accountability is not fun. Since small groups do enjoy "good times," and participants do tend to grow fond of one another, the practice of accountability is something we tend to resist. It makes us uncomfortable when a leader (or a leader of group leaders) asks questions like: "Are you living up to our core values and beliefs spontaneously and daringly in daily living? Are you surrendering your own ego and personal agenda to empower others to discover their full potential? Are you aligning with God's mission, modeling integrity, honing relational skills, and a being team player?" With questions like that, most of us would rather go to the dentist.

But at the end of the year (or whatever is the small-group covenant time period), God asks the group leader and each group participant: "Have you grown? Are you a better person? Are you a better Christian? Are you further along in Christ because you participated in this group?" It is the anticipation of that question that makes accountability so urgent. So replace the image of the dentist peering into your mouth with the image of Jesus peering into your life. He is six inches away, looking into your eyes, your mouth is already open, and he is waiting for an answer.

At the risk of getting too "theological," I think small-group leaders often avoid accountability when they forget about the power of sin. And it is easy to forget, because small groups are just so enjoyable, and the acceptance is just so wonderful, we really don't want to spoil it all with any reminders about inevitable shortcomings. I'm told the biggest reason people avoid the dentist is that they are having such fun eating and drinking that they don't want to spoil it with reminders about aging and inevitable tooth decay.

IMPROVING SMALL-GROUP ACCOUNTABILITY

At any rate, when you think about it, even the best people and most sincere Christians are inevitable sinners.

- You and I are always contradicting core values and beliefs, somewhere, sometime, somehow, with someone. We just can't help it.
- There is a "hidden controller" in every one of us, no matter how hard we try to overcome the temptations of self-centeredness. You and I will always shamefully enjoy somebody freeing us of responsibility by telling us what to do, or we will always arrogantly enjoy usurping somebody's rights by telling them what to do. And to my everlasting shame, I will always assume you are more likely to do it than I am!
- You and I are always getting sidetracked and need to be realigned with God's purpose; we are forever falling short as models of Christian life; we are chronically weary of learning new things; and teamwork is always lots more trouble than doing it ourselves.

Basically, we are sinners. Even the small-group leaders are sinners. But part of their leadership is that they are the first to admit it and do something about it.

So when I am asked to write a brief, general coaching article on accountability, I have to say that the chief barrier is not that we don't know how to do it, but that we really don't want to do it. Once you desire to do it, how to do it becomes rather obvious. Do what Jesus did. Define and model the fruits of the Spirit; intervene to break control; and help people get what they need to align mission, live well, learn constantly, and work together.

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Discuss:

1. How does our church currently handle accountability for small-group leaders?
2. How has "control" manifested itself in our small groups? In our group leaders? How can the church leadership help?
3. What steps can our church take to make sure that group leaders are regularly held accountable for the growth and success of their groups?



Further Exploration

Websites and books to help with small-group accountability

SmallGroups.com. Small-groups training resources from Christianity Today International.

- "[Small-Group Evaluations](#)" Assessment Pack
- "[Soul Care](#)" Practical Ministry Skills
- "[Coaching Small-Group Leaders](#)" Practical Ministry Skills

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Coach: Empower Others to Effectively Lead a Small Group by *Joel Comiskey*. Influential small-groups author Joel Comiskey brings trusted research and practical advice to discuss coaching group leaders (CCS Publishing, 2007; ISBN 0979067914).

Conformed to His Image by *Kenneth Boa*. Biblical and practical approaches to spiritual formation (Zondervan, 2001; ISBN 978-0310238485).

I'm a Leader...Now What? by *Michael Mack*. Practical advice on how to guide and maintain an effective small group (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720769).

Making Small Groups Work by *Henry Cloud and John Townsend*. This book provides small-group leaders with valuable guidance and information on how they can help their groups to grow spiritually, emotionally, and relationally (Zondervan; ISBN 978-0310255123).