

CHIP INGRAM - Small Group Coaching - Building Community

<http://livingontheedge.org/group-studies/coaching-for-leaders/whats-the-key-to-helping-my-small-group-experience-authentic-community> (a brief video is available on the web site for each article)

How to Build an Authentic Community in Your Small Group

Many of us have probably lead or been in small groups where there wasn't a deep connection between members for a long time, if at all. So it should come as no surprise that one of the biggest challenges of leading a small group is facilitating the formation of an authentic community.

Often, when a group is new people show up, do the study and watch the DVD. They bring their Bibles and make some chitchat. But, make no mistake, although people are meeting and sharing this is not an authentic community.

In an authentic community, there is a sense of safety and vulnerability, where people show up and are their "real" selves. They also start to meet the real needs of their fellow group members and they do it for the right reasons, which is to honor and love God and not to get strokes.

The best understanding of an authentic community comes out of Romans 12:9-13 where the Apostle Paul defines authentic community when he says, "Let love be without hypocrisy," or literally, "without a mask." He goes on to say, "Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." Then, Paul says how in an authentic community people rejoice in hope, devote their selves to prayer, and they care for one another by contributing to one another's needs.

So how does authentic community actually happen? Our model of such a community is depicted in Acts 2:42-47 where we read about a church that was committed to the Word, committed to prayer, and committed to celebrating the Lord's Supper and keeping Christ as their central focus. In the early church everyone had a great sense of unity and they shared many things in common. Basically, they did life with one another and they bore each other's burdens.

In a similar way, small groups need to provide members with the time and space for authentic interactions to occur. But this can only happen when you as the leader meet your group members "real" needs, which are usually not convenient but costly.

So maybe you're wondering, "OK, I want authentic community, but I'm not sure if I can meet all these people's 'real' needs, especially when I have my own life, family, job, etc. What can I do?"

One way is to choose one person in your group and go deep with them. As a leader, you can demonstrate authenticity for the rest of the group if you love even just one person deeply and authentically. The reality is, you can't meet all the needs of all the people, but if you choose one person out of your group and be available to him or her, your actions could change the culture of the whole group.

How to Cultivate a Sense of Family and Belonging that Goes Beyond Your Weekly Group Study

Do you want your group members to have a sense of family and belonging that goes beyond your weekly meeting? If this is your desire, you must first be willing to challenge your mindset. This means you need to stop thinking about your small group as a time and a place and a meeting.

Sometimes we get stuck thinking that small group is what we do on Tuesday night from seven to nine o'clock at our house. Meetings are important, but you have to break the mindset that small group is only a meeting. Small group goes beyond this. It's about doing life together, being engaged in each other's world, and touching base with each other throughout the week.

One way for your group to break out of its old rut is by doing something completely different as a group. For instance, if you meet every Tuesday night, maybe once a month or once every six weeks, intentionally don't meet up on Tuesday night. Instead of doing your study, everyone does a mission project or eats a meal together. Or maybe just the women or just the guys get together for an early morning breakfast once a month.

The point of this is to change your group's focus from "doing" to "being in relationship." Its sole purpose then becomes not about going through a study as much as it is just getting into each other's lives -- talking about your marriages, your relationship with your kids, or about how things are going at the office.

Another great way to develop closeness within your group is to celebrate each other's birthdays and anniversaries. Do something special on those occasions. This could include getting together for an outing and even involving the kids, like a picnic or a camping trip.

Perhaps one of the best ways to develop community outside of your small group meeting is to do a ministry project. This could be volunteering at a homeless shelter, delivering food to shut-ins or visiting the elderly. If you're worried about not having enough time to put together an event, think about a person in your group who has a passion and a gifting for this and ask them to line up the event. Remember, this isn't about "doing an event" but it's about serving and helping others, while building deeper relationships in the process.

Top Five Things that “Kill” a Small Group

There are lots of things that can be detrimental to the health and growth of your small group. To prevent the demise of your small group, as a small group leader you need to know the top five things that can “kill” your group as well as some suggestions to help you navigate and prevent some of these pitfalls.

The first thing is letting an emotionally needy person dominate and sidetrack the group. Every week these people talk the most and the group begins to feel more like a group therapy session than a small group study. The second thing is breaking confidentiality. Your small group has to be a safe place where people can show up with the real stuff in their lives. But when trust is breached, people will shut down and some of them will eventually abandon the group.

The third thing is what some would call the “master teacher syndrome.” One of the quickest ways to kill your group is for the leader to turn the group meeting into their own personal little classroom. Good small group leaders focus on helping people in their group grow by encouraging others to take their spiritual next steps rather than just dispensing all of their biblical knowledge.

The fourth thing that can kill your group is to have no interaction outside the group meeting. You can develop some community in your group meeting, but really, it’s outside the meeting where relationships are forged. This might mean having lunch together, getting families together, taking a meal to someone in the group who’s sick or doing a service project together. Whatever it is, doing something outside of your regular meeting time helps to deepen the bond between people in the group.

And then, finally, the fifth thing is not making the group a priority. This is one of the quickest ways to kill your group. To have a good small group, everyone has to show up and everyone has to be committed to each other. This means all of the group members make the group meeting a priority! That means taking part in the group and owning some of the responsibility. A small group is like a family, and in a family, everybody helps out.