

THE POCKET GUIDE TO



burnout-free
small group
leadership

how to gather a core team and
lead from the second chair

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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Chapter One	
Change the Leader of Your Group	9
Chapter Two	
Make More Disciples By Making Less	25
Chapter Three	
Discover and Develop a Core Team to Launch New Groups	41
Chapter Four	
How to Develop Teamwork in Your Present Group	57
Chapter Five	
Let Go of Leadership.	77
Chapter Six	
Launch the Group (and Go!)	89
End Notes	113

Introduction

Don's small group started smoothly and seemed to go well the first several months. Within the first year, Don called me to tell me he was stepping down from group leadership. When I met with him to ask what happened, he told me about his increasingly frantic pace of life and the overwhelming amount of time and energy required to facilitate weekly small group meetings and keep up with the members of his group.

In the leadership training at my church, we emphasize that the leader is primarily a shepherd. As Don shared his heart about leading his group, I could tell he was serious about that responsibility. He described the time he spent preparing the study, calling members, caring for some of the needy people in the group, discipling two of the newer

Christians, dealing with issues and conflicts, helping his wife clean the house before meetings, and praying daily for group members. On top of all this, Don had a very demanding job, a family, and other church responsibilities. No wonder he was stepping down from leadership!

Joel Comiskey writes, "All cell leaders face the 'tyranny of the urgent,'"¹ He is absolutely right. Unfortunately, dealing with the urgent all the time leads to stress, frustration, discouragement, and eventual burnout. Don's predicament as a leader is nothing new. As a small groups pastor, I see it all the time.

Christian counselor, author, and speaker John Townsend provides a cure to leadership burnout using the following mathematical structure:²

RESPONSIBILITIES
RESOURCES

In the ideal world, he says, you as a leader should have an equal amount of (or more) resources compared to your number of responsibilities. When you become frustrated and burned out as a leader, on further inspection you will find that you have far more responsibilities than resources.

There are two ways to remedy small group

leader burnout: reduce your responsibilities or increase your resources (or both). Don did what lots of leaders do—he chose to eliminate his responsibilities by abandoning the position. Don could have easily chosen to add resources had he known this option was available. Townsend suggests that one of the best resources to battle leader burnout is people. By adding people to the leadership role, the resources outweigh the responsibilities and small group leadership becomes fun and quite fulfilling.

As a small groups pastor, I want to keep my small group leaders from burning out. Even more, I want to help them succeed in their shepherding ministry, which is vital to God's plan and the health of our church. Time and time again, I've found the best ways to help my leaders do this is to show them ways to reduce their responsibilities and increase their resources by creating a leadership team.

I know that not everyone identifies with athletic metaphors and terminology. So when I discuss a term like "teams" feel free to think of a work team, a ministry team, a debate team, or any other type of team on which you've been active. I am a sports enthusiast, however, so I'll use sports stories, especially basketball and mountain biking, two of my favorite athletic pursuits.

What I propose in this book is not a new method or organizational structure. It's a natural, organic, and highly relational way to lead, shepherd, and disciple the members of your group with others instead of doing everything yourself.

Over the last several years I've invested a lot of time studying team building. And for a very good reason: I was not very good at it! Like many leaders, I thought I could and I even needed to do it all myself! Not only was I burning out as a leader, I was also keeping others from using their leadership gifting. So I started reading everything I could get my hands on about team building. I attended seminars, browsed web sites, and spent time with people who are great team-builders.

As I've grown as a team-builder myself, I've discovered that it's really not difficult; in fact it's made leadership more fun, encouraging, and rewarding.

In this little book, I want to share with you what I've learned about turning your small group into a soul-winning, care-giving team. No matter how stressed or overwhelmed you may feel in leading your group right now, I believe what you are about to learn will revolutionize small group leadership for you and make leading your group more fun, encouraging, and rewarding for you too!

Chapter One

Change the Leader of Your Group

Every team requires unity. A team has to move as one unit, one force, with each person understanding and assisting the roles of his teammates. If the team doesn't do this, whatever the reason, it goes down in defeat. You win or lose as a team, as a family.

-Jack Kemp

For a number of years, I've coached youth sports. Last year, my second son, now 15 years old, played on a solid eighth-grade school team called The Dragons. While the team has very talented athletes, the coaching staff has worked overtime to help these individuals work together.

What our young players have yet to learn is that great individuals do not make a championship team. The Dragons consistently lose games to teams with far inferior players. A team is not just a group of players with the same uniforms, running the same plays on the same court. A great team sacrifices personal desires and goals for the good of the whole. After years of frustration as a coach, I can appreciate the feelings of baseball legend Casey Stengel, who once said, "It's easy to get good players.

Getting them to play *together*, that's the hard part."

Your small group is not automatically a "team" just because you meet regularly in the same place, eat the same food, and study the same Bible passages. Becoming a successful, fruit-bearing team takes work and sacrifice. It starts with knowing who the real team leader is. It then grows stronger with a commitment to the team and the group's goals. While it may be easier to launch a small group as a team effort, you can also transform your current group into a winning team using the biblical principles found in the short chapters of this book.

Christian writers Win and Charles Arn wrote, "Disciple-making is most effective when it is a 'team effort.'"¹ In fact, everything in the Christian life is more effective when we do it together. Studying and applying truths from the Bible is better together. Serving is better together. Evangelism is better together. And eating is always better together!

Solomon wrote about the benefits of teamwork nearly three thousand years ago:

It's better to have a partner than go it alone.
Share the work, share the wealth. And if
one falls down, the other helps, But if
there's no one to help, tough! Two in a bed

warm each other. Alone, you shiver all night. By yourself you're unprotected. With a friend you can face the worst. Can you round up a third? A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.

(Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, *The Message*)

Partnership produces not only protection, but also synergistic results. This passage also confirms that the opposite is true: individualism in ministry places a leader in danger and limits his or her effectiveness. It is indeed lonely at the top when you have no one to help you lead!

Individualism is a disease that has disabled the church. Countless other books and articles have adequately covered the causes and effects of individualism on the church. It's time for small group leaders to stop thinking and acting like the world—to be countercultural to individualism and lead like Jesus led, as a team. The slogan we need to repeat today is...

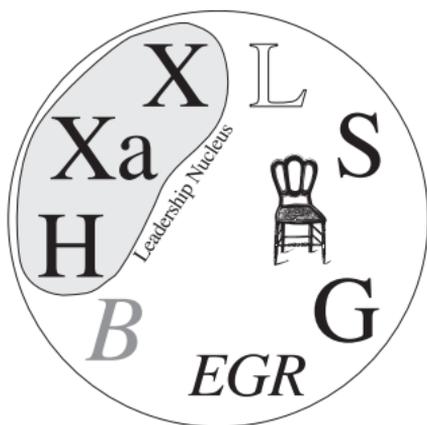
No one leads alone

The Traditional Small Group Leader Paradigm

For several decades, small group leaders have been taught that leading is a solo act. For the most part, they have been given the sole responsibility for finding, inviting, shepherding, calling, praying for, and ministering to the rest of the group—a group usually consisting of 8-12 people. I have seen training manuals that picture small groups something like this (_ = Group Member):



In 1991, a church growth expert named Carl George introduced what he called the “Meta-Church.” He said that a healthy small group consisted of people at various spiritual levels and must be led by a “leadership nucleus.” This nucleus is comprised of the leader, apprentice, and a host:²



- X** - Facilitator
- Xa** - Apprentice
- H** - Host/Hostess
- B** - Babysitter (optional)
- L** - Coach (drops in from time to time)
- S** - Seeker
- G** - Growing Christian
- EGR** - Extra Grace Required Person (also optional, but expected).
-  The Empty Chair

For many years, church leaders have understood the need for the leadership nucleus, but it didn't solve many of the problems found in small group leadership. Leaders still burned out. Many groups did not grow or multiply. For all the great structures, designs, and birthing protocols developed and taught through the years, vital ingredients were still missing.

I've seen little evidence that these leadership nuclei were ever taught how to operate effectively as a team. That's a major reason I've written this book, and I'll show you specifically how these leadership

nuclei (or what I call core teams) work together. But there's something even bigger missing from George's picture of a healthy group, something very central and essential to spiritual leadership.

Small Group Leadership and Good Stewardship

The power for small group health, growth, and multiplication comes not from a model, program, or even one's leadership abilities. It is vital to remember the lesson of stewardship. God owns everything. We are simply managers. You are not the real leader or shepherd of the small group under your care. You are not the center of the group. If everyone in your small group sat in a circle, closed their eyes, and then simultaneously pointed to the group leader, they should all point upward!

“The Best Small Group Leader Ever” prayed to the Father about his group:

I spelled out your character in detail to the men and women you gave me. They were yours in the first place; Then you gave them to me, And they have now done what you said. They know now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that everything you gave me is first-hand from you.

(John 17:6, 7, *The Message*)

Jesus modeled steward-leadership well for his followers. He knew they really belonged to the Father, but that the Father had given them to him to lead as an act of stewardship. He modeled for them, and us, that everything God gives us is firsthand from him: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does” (John 5:19, *NLT*). In other words, Jesus always pointed up!

One of the members of his small group (a disciple named Peter) later wrote,

Care for the flock that God has *entrusted to you*. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. Don’t lord it over the people *assigned to your care*, but lead them by your good example. And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of glory and honor.

(1 Peter 5:2-4, *NLT*, emphasis mine)

The first thing you must learn to avoid burnout as a small group leader is that God is the real leader and center of every Christian small group. Your group belongs to him, but he entrusts it to you as his

ambassador or representative. He has assigned the group members to you for care, guidance, and ministry until Christ returns. Therefore, your leadership in your group is an act of stewardship that looks like this:



God's rightful position is at the very center of the group. He is the Master, Leader, Shepherd, and Owner of your group. He is the Head of the Body of Christ. He is the reason for the group's meeting, the one who brings it together, and the one who brings power and transformation to the gathering. He "has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18). This should not only humble you as a leader, but take away your heavy burden and the pressure

you put on yourself! God is in charge and “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph. 3:20).

I want to encourage you to stop reading for a moment and think about how you’ve viewed your role as a small group leader. Is God in charge and at the center of your ministry? Are you beside him leading as a faithful steward under his power or your own? If you find that you are leading under your own power, pray about that right now and give your group to God and give him permission to be the center and leader of your group.

Leading from the Second Chair

As a small group leader, you are “leading from the second chair.” In a book by the same name,³ Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson provide principles and guidelines for being a second-tier leader. The description for this book says, “*Leading from the Second Chair* will raise awareness of the need for strong leaders in secondary positions. . . . It will reshape the way they view their role, with an emphasis on their own responsibility as leaders. It recognizes the unique challenges and frustrations of serving in a subordinate position and equips these

leaders with the attitudes and skills that they will need to survive and thrive in this new paradigm.” The fact is, *every* effective Christian leader is a second-chair leader, leading from a subordinate position. Christian leaders follow Christ.

The apostle Paul modeled true second-chair leadership: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Jesus himself modeled second-chair leadership: “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). As a second-chair leader, you are to be completely dependent on the One who sits upon the throne of your life. He leads through you. Your attitude should be much like that of Mother Teresa, who said, “I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.”

Most of us have never been taught how to lead from a subordinate position to God and it does not come naturally. So we must reorient ourselves to think and lead in a new way. I believe this is exactly what the apostle Paul had in mind when he penned these words:

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a

living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2, *NLT*)

This passage helps us as we consider how to transform our lives and leadership from the normal behaviors and customs of our world to being God-directed. It begins with placing our lives before God each day as an offering. Each morning when I wake up—before my feet even hit the floor—I surrender my day to God. Although I am faithful in doing this daily, I've found that this is not enough. Throughout my day, I must stop and surrender a meeting I'm walking into, a phone call I'm about to make, or an email I'm writing. Sometimes I find I must stop in the middle of an activity or conversation to surrender it to God.

Over time, God is slowly changing the way I think, but some part of me always wants to try to regain control. It's a constant battle. But I've found that when God is on the throne and I am in the

second chair, my steward-leadership is powerful and quite effective. I could recount numerous instances of this as proof for you, but one I always remember happened a couple years ago.

I received a call from Carolyn, a long-time church member whose husband was near death. On my way to the hospital, I prayed for John's family and what I might say when I arrived. I remember telling God that I had absolutely nothing of substance to offer. I did not know what to say to the family and had some nervousness and fears about how to minister to them. I said, "Since I have nothing, Father, you'll have to do all the work. Just use me any way you want."

When I walked into the room, I had absolutely no agenda or plan of my own. I was just there. I can't even remember what I said or did that day. But when I left, I sensed that God had used me in a powerful way. One of the daughters called me the next morning to tell me John had passed away peacefully, and she expressed her thankfulness for how I ministered to her family. I knew I could only take credit for being an instrument that God used to love this family as they walked through what David called "the valley of the shadow of death." As she spoke, I felt humbled and privileged at the same time.

Just last month, John's son-in-law gave his life to Christ. Deep within my spirit, I felt an overwhelming sense of joy I could not explain, but again I sensed God's sovereignty—I knew how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is. And I knew God used my time at the hospital that day to share Christ's love in a transformational way.

I meet people all the time who struggle with knowing God's will or what he wants them to do. It starts with allowing God to truly be the Lord and Leader of your life, allowing him to change the way you think. Then, as Romans 12:2 tells us, you will know what God wants you to do. This is where burnout ends and spiritual, second-chair small group leadership begins.

Your Role as a Leader

Your main job as a leader is very simple: to stay very close to God. You must be connected to the Vine in order to bear any fruit. Apart from him you can do nothing (John 15:5). In my book *Leading from the Heart*, I used King David—a man after God's own heart—as a biblical illustration of how to lead out of an intimate relationship with God.

Just like the Psalmist, imagine your life as a cup. Christ pours his abundant life into you as you spend

time with him. In fact, he continues to pour into you even to overflowing. (The word Jesus used in John 10:10 for “abundant” or “full” actually means “superabundant” or “overflowing.”) Christ’s activity within you overflows into the lives of the people who are closest to you. As David put it in Psalm 23:5, “my cup overflows” with God’s grace, love, and blessings.

As you gather together with your small group in Christ’s name and for his purposes, he is literally present with you (Matthew 18:20). How do you make his presence and leadership real? I always take the first part of every meeting to welcome him and to ask him to lead, help us listen to him, and show us his way. That’s a start, but I’ve found that the group can still forget who is in charge unless we continue to keep him central throughout the meeting. In every part of the group gathering, the leader leads the group to Christ and ushers Christ to the group.

The apostle Paul often compared his ministry to running a race (Acts 20:24; 1 Corinthians 9:24; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7; Hebrews 12:1). Paul’s goal was to “finish the race and complete the task the Lord has given me” (Acts 20:24). He was able to do that because he was “compelled by the Spirit” (v. 22), not by his own agenda. Paul knew

Your first burnout prevention tool:
**Transform your paradigm from leadership
to *stewardship*.**

that God is “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:21), and the apostle was dependent on this all-powerful God as the real leader. For him, leadership was stewardship. This is where it begins with you and me as leaders as well.

But it does not end here. Once we acknowledge the real Team Leader and understand group stewardship, we must learn how to share our second-chair leadership with others.

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