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Building a simple, clear small group leadership pathway

by Steve Gladen

The small group leaders in your church want to make a difference. They wouldn't have signed up to a lead a group otherwise. They're willing to spend the time, work hard, and give all they've got to ministry, but you've got to give them the tools to minister smarter as well.

To do that, you need to create a clear and simple way to help your leaders grow. In 2002, when Saddleback did the 40 Days of Purpose campaign for the first time, Rick Warren challenged us to start thousands of new small groups. It was an unbelievable challenge with only a few months until the start of the campaign. There was no way we were going to train all the leaders we needed in time using our same old methods, so we started experimenting with new ways to do it.

“If you can't get people into your small group training, you're probably requiring too much training up front.**”**

Steve Gladen, pastor at Saddleback Church

Here are some convictions we came to in the process:

Don't give too much training up front; encourage continued education. You may be in a church that requires 30 weeks of leader training before entrusting sheep to anyone. No wonder you have trouble getting people to participate! If you can't get people into your small group training, you're probably requiring too much training up front. We just drop our leaders into the deep end of the pool. Once they start leading a group, they realize quickly that they're going to need some more help to be effective.

Encourage your leaders to pass on their training to those they lead. Rick Warren has taught me that if you can't write what you're teaching on a napkin, it's too complex. Your training needs to be simple enough for your leaders to pass on to others. That'll multiply the effectiveness of your training beyond the mere numbers who can attend.

Make the training as relational as possible. In the long run, relationships will be the most effective training tools you'll pass on to your leaders. If you can help them build relationships with other leaders who have or are experiencing leadership challenges, they'll always have a place to go when problems come.

Provide high-quality training through multiple delivery systems. At Saddleback, we try to make our training as easy as possible for our leaders. One way we do this is through internet-based training that they can access at their convenience.

Make training an expectation. People need to realize that training is a part of serving as a small group leader right from the beginning. Don't surprise your leaders with additional training requirements after they get started.

Speak to their hearts. Training isn't just for our heads – it's for our hearts as well. If you're going to help your small group leaders become more effective, you'll need to inspire them and help them see how their ministry is impacting the lives of others. If you speak to their hearts during training, they'll come back for more.

Saddleback's leadership pathway

With those convictions as a backdrop, we've created a leadership pathway that's allowed us to get more people through training and train them more effectively in the process. We start out with very few hoops for prospective leaders to jump through. To HOST a small group at Saddleback, you only need to **have a heart for people, open your home, serve a snack, and turn on the DVD player.**

To help our hosts be successful, we offer Leadership Training I monthly on the church campus. During this training we introduce three things to the hosts – a strategic overview of our small groups, a small group survival guide, and our small group support system

As part of introducing hosts to their support systems, we connect them to a community leader. Over the next few years in Leadership Training II, they'll go through five modules of additional training with these community leaders. During these five modules we talk about character, skills, building a healthy small group, empowering your group for ministry, and [The P.E.A.C.E. Plan](#).

Once our hosts complete Leadership Training II, they're full-fledged leaders at Saddleback. But the training continues. Once a year we invite all of our hosts to Small Group Host Gatherings, where we have large group worship and deeper training in the five purposes.

At next year's two [Saddleback Small Group Conferences](#) in Lake Forest, Calif., and Atlanta, Ga, we'll talk more in-depth about our leadership pathway. We hope you'll join us!



Article by Steve Gladen

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