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Infrastructure: The Foundation of Your Small Group Ministry

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Last month we looked at “Gathering” as an important part of sustaining groups, now I want to take a look at infrastructure and the role it plays in keeping groups on purpose. As you start to add groups to your church, a common problem is keeping them. Groups left on their own will soon fade away. Without the proper guidance, groups will become social communities, and without purpose people will quit coming because there are more than enough social communities pulling at us.

Let me go through some common questions on infrastructure to help us make “infrastructure” a strategic word instead of a task word.

What do you mean when you use the term “infrastructure”? Infrastructure is the term used to describe the supporting structure for groups in your church. Imagine building a city with no roads. Can you get around? Sure. But with a little planning and direction, you can make things run much smoother. I love Ecclesiastes 10:10, If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success. This verse is telling us we need to work smarter, not harder. Infrastructure gives you the ability to oversee a lot of groups and determine whether health is happening. And when I refer to infrastructure, I’m not saying you need infrastructure only when you have hundreds of groups. If you have over 10 groups, you need infrastructure!

What is the purpose of infrastructure? The purpose of infrastructure is to design, develop, and maintain the health of your small groups. At Saddleback Church our infrastructure is designed to develop healthy individuals and groups by balancing the 5 Biblical purposes (The Great Commission and Great Commandment). Having a design and knowing what you want to develop is not enough. You need to not only develop your design, but also maintain it through relationships. Maintaining may not seem necessary, but it is crucial if you want to stay on course. There is a delicate balance in giving groups the right amount of guidance. Too much and it can crush the group. Not enough, the group will become purposeless. This delicate balance can only be achieved through constant relational guidance.

Do all churches need a small group infrastructure? Only if you want to stay the course and finish the race strong! Everything needs structure. We structure for growth, but not for control.

What “levels” of infrastructure does Saddleback have? Even though the number of our small groups is in the multiple thousands, our structure is somewhat flat. We have two levels that oversee the small groups. A Community Leader (CL) who has a ratio of 1:25 small group leaders, and an Area Leader (AL) who has CL’s under them (the number varies), and has a ratio of 1:250 small group leaders.

How do you recruit people for the different levels? It’s all about relationship, make-up and vision. Everyone has 168 hours a week to give. How they give of their time is based on where their heart is. In order to speak to their heart, you need to have a relationship with them. To have the relationship takes time...period. The end. You cannot micro-wave relationship! Make-up is the next key to recruiting. By make-up I mean, what is their personality and how is their life arranged? You need to look at two aspects. First, do they have the heart to shepherd/care for people and take them to where you want them? Next, do they have the time and availability to do what you want with the commitments they have in life.? To close the deal on recruiting people you need vision. People will give time to a vision they can believe in. You need to let them know they are part of something bigger than them and with eternal impact.

How do you train everyone? Our job descriptions can be written on a napkin. People need to know the macro concepts and then be able to go micro as they can take it in. Again, relational training is always the best choice. The main training for Saddleback infrastructure is based on “care” and how you use “care” to build the 5 Biblical purposes into every group and life. Once relationships are established, traditional small group training is implemented, and the vision starts flowing.

How do you keep track of everyone? One of the churches I worked for in the 80’s was the largest church in America at that time. That pastor built his church on 3x5 cards and shoeboxes. When we were switching over to computers and frustrations began to set in, I will never forget him saying, “I built this church on 3x5 cards and shoeboxes and we can go back to that if needed.” The point is, you can do it without computers, but in today’s era, there are so many programs that can help you keep track of your leaders and their people. We track people/group development, not attendance. It is very important to figure out what you want to track before you start to track.

If I am thinking about adding a small group infrastructure, what should be my first step? Know your desired results and keep the end in mind. If your people don’t know what they are trying to tangibly produce, then your infrastructure has no guideline or base for success. Once you know what you want, you can decide what you want to track and how you want to develop groups. Recruiting can then take place, because you know what to recruit for.

Infrastructure may not be the most exciting piece of your small group ministry, but it is what sustains your ministry. Don’t overlook it. It is always far easier to grow groups than sustain them.