

When You Need to Remove a Group Leader

Thomas G. Bandy

Yes, it is possible to fire a volunteer! Non-Profit organizations do it all the time in health care and social services. This is sometimes necessary in order to protect the credibility and reputation of your church, and crucial to avoid potential litigation. It may sound “uncharitable” to the small group leader, but you need to protect the vulnerable people of a small group, and reassure newcomers that your small groups are safe and healthy places to be. Jesus often spoke of the accountability of Christians to God and each other (e.g. Mat. 18: 15-17), and his parables underlined the need to dismiss managers who were ineffective for God's mission (e.g. Luke 16: 1-13). Paul separated from John Mark for the sake of the mission (Acts 15:36-39), and challenged the wayward Corinthians to test themselves or be disciplined (2 Cor. 13:1-4).

Pastors often point to the words of Jesus about accountability (Mat. 18:15,16), or retell the story of Peter's confrontation with Ananias and Saphira to demonstrate the need to occasionally remove a leader. I think a better story is the mentoring of Apollos by Priscilla and Aquila to help him become

Perhaps the most important thing churches must learn is that *you can't fire someone you never trained in the first place!* Anyone who has lurked around the website www.SmallGroup.com should be aware of the importance of training. Most of that, however, is about training skills ... and incompetency is probably this least likely reason you might fire a volunteer. Your program must include training about positive behavior patterns you expect small group leaders to model, bedrock faith convictions that your small group leaders are expected to mentor, and policy guidelines that your small group leaders are expected to follow.

The most common reason a church removes a small group leader is that they have somehow breached, subverted, or contradicted the core values and bedrock beliefs of a church. For example, one pastor had a male small group leader who was discovered to be simultaneously daring three women in his small group! That contradicted our core value for gender respect, and in Canada that is considered to be sexual harassment. Or, for example, another pastor of a rapidly growing church discovered that the “Book Club Small Group” for young adults was reading graphic, violent, vampire novels. That might be popular at High School, but it subverted the bedrock belief of the church in the sovereignty and goodness of God. Finally, for example, an urban church in a stressed neighborhood had a church policy that small groups could not meet in the building at night without staff on the premises. When a small group leader persisted in delaying closure of her small group past midnight, she had to be removed. Failure to do so would have endangered the safety of members and visitors that church policy was designed to protect.

You might ask how these church leaders “discovered” all this! You do rely on spontaneous feedback, but primarily you rely on regular evaluation and review with your small group leaders. This could happen 2 – 3 times a year. Small group leaders are coached and evaluated based on their alignment to the mission of the church, their ability to model and mentor the values and beliefs of the church, their skills to guide spiritual growth, and their ability to work as a team. Nobody is a saint, and nobody is perfect, so these “upgrade opportunities” are great ways to improve one's ability as a group leader. Growing churches generally *require* attendance.

There is a procedure to be followed if you have a difficult volunteer and you are considering their removal as a small group leader. This procedure basically imitates the standard personnel procedures of health care, social services, and other non-profit organizations. This is what needs to be in place:

- ✓ A Basic Training workshop sets the benchmark for small group leadership, and introduces volunteers to the key values, beliefs, policies, and other expectations of the church for all leaders.
- ✓ “Upgrade Opportunities” 2-3 times a year, plus constant availability for individual coaching, keeps small group leaders sharp and reveals emerging problems (usually before they become serious).
- ✓ The pastor or small group coordinator should keep a confidential journal for every small group leader. This journal maintains a running evaluation of a leader based on the following categories of credibility¹:

¹ See my book *Spirited Leadership: Empowering People to Do What Matters* (Chalice Press & www.Amazon.com)

- **Mission Attitude:** Enthusiasm and dedication to the overall mission of the church;
 - **High Integrity:** Ability to model and mentor the core values and bedrock beliefs of the church;
 - **Competency:** Skills required to encourage spiritual growth and quality relationships;
 - **Teamwork:** Ability to work generously and cooperatively with others.
- ✓ If a problem is identified in any of these categories, a 1:1 interview with the small group leader identifies the problem ... *and provides a clear path to correct the problem*. If the problem involves a breach in human rights, or civil/criminal law, the small group leader is usually removed *immediately*. If the problem involves a mistake due to misinformation, a gap in skills, or poor mission attitude, the volunteer will be given a reasonable amount of time to correct the problem. Usually this is between 1 – 3 months, under the supervision of the pastor or small group coordinator.
 - ✓ Always provide opportunities with counselors or trainers; programs or curriculums; or therapy or continuing education for small group leaders to be rehabilitated or retrained as needed. Volunteers will know you seriously care about their growth and effectiveness if you also subsidize part of the cost to do it. Mentor with an elder of the church to learn how to surrender to mission; study scripture and doctrine to clarify values and beliefs; take a course to improve competency; work on a mission project to improve teamwork.
 - ✓ If the small group leader solves the problem within a specified time, then reinstate or confirm them in leadership. You want to do this with confidence, so that you can defend the integrity and effectiveness of this leader in case there is any question. Volunteers who overcome mistakes need to be affirmed unreservedly, and their own personal and spiritual growth celebrated. It is an example for all.
 - ✓ If the small group leader cannot or will not correct the problem within a specified reasonable time, then they *must* be removed permanently. There should be no ambiguity. It doesn't matter if they are young or old, veteran members or newcomers, or the first cousin of the best giver.

High accountability is the mark of growing churches, and crucial for the success of a small group oriented church. All it takes for a church to lose credibility in the eyes of the public is for one small group leader (or any leader) to be unaligned to the mission, untrustworthy in their values or beliefs, chronically incompetent to encourage spiritual growth and quality relationships, or to prickly or unreliable in their teamwork. This is why non-profit organizations introduce “Zero Tolerance” policies. Remember, however, that “zero tolerance” policies only work if they are coupled with credible rehabilitation and retraining opportunities ... and when volunteers can hope to be wholeheartedly affirmed by the church at the end of the process.

Here is the summary. Small group churches *must* be able to remove small group leaders with a credible process of basic training, upgrade coaching, regular evaluation, processes for retraining or rehabilitation, and deadlines for decision. Here are the most common reasons for removal (in order of frequency and severity):

- a) A small group leader abuses human rights or breaks the law. Removal is immediate, and the individual is encouraged to seek therapy, rehabilitation, or legal counsel.
- b) A small group leader contradicts the core values, beliefs, or policies of a church. Removal may be immediate, or if foundational basic training has been lax at the beginning, this may be determined after a follow-up training exercise.
- c) A small group leader is unclear about mission, undisciplined in Christian lifestyle, ineffective in guiding spiritual growth and quality relationships, or unable to work with a team. A timeline of 1-3 months provides a process for counseling or coaching, with a final decision about removal at the end.

Traditional church members may be surprised by these higher standards of accountability, but new members and visitors will be greatly encouraged. They will be confident that your church is a safe and healthy place to be, and that they will indeed grow personally and relationally. Anyone who has volunteered in other health care or social service agencies will recognize these principles and processes.

High accountability for small group leadership is one of those “sea changes” in the post-Christendom and post-Modern world. Credible leadership is all important. In the old days, churches could rely on their programs and curriculums to bear the burden of church growth and mission impact. Volunteers just followed the manual and did the best they could. However, emerging generations less than 50 years old expect different things of the church. They are looking for credible leaders to demonstrate how to faithfully follow God’s mission and live a Christian lifestyle. Churches today must go out of their way to avoid the slightest hint of hypocrisy, and equip leader to be extraordinarily authentic and effective.

Tom Bandy

www.ThrivingChurch.com