

Embedding Trust

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Nothing else accelerates or decelerates small group life than trust. When a small group ministry has a reputation for trust, people join and people grow. However, when a small group ministry has a crisis of trust, people leave and people stagnate. It can take years to develop a reputation of trust, and only single incident can break it apart. Therefore, small group leaders must exercise constant diligence to make sure that trust is embedded in every group, every meeting, and every participant.

There are six ways small group leaders can ensure that trust is the norm in their small group. I'll highlight each one, along with some suggestions for practical application.

The first three are foundational ways leaders embed trust at the very beginning of a small group.

1. Congregational DNA
2. Covenant
3. Confidentiality

The second three are functional ways leaders embed trust as the life of the group unfolds.

4. Collective Memory
5. Mentor and Model
6. Repetitive Prayer

Remember that the truth about trust is revealed less in the pre-planned tactic than in the spontaneous action or unrehearsed word. Do not hesitate to interrupt the flow of conversation, or ask someone to step aside for 1:1 conversation, if there is even a hint of broken trust. Better to apologize for over-reaction, than be timid in intervention.

Foundational Ways to Embed Trust

I include some sample evaluation questions for each of the first three foundational categories. Personally, I avoid either/or evaluation questions, and prefer doing evaluations as part of a continuum from “imperfect” to “perfect”. This is less judgemental, and invites more dialogue to explain ourselves.

1. Congregational DNA:

The foundation of all trust is the congregational consensus around core values, bedrock beliefs, motivating vision, and purposeful mission. Many churches have created this through a spiritual formation process. It is on the homepage of the website, and they use it to train staff, board members, and small group leaders. If your church is still unclear about this consensus, then you can use the "Fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:21-22) and the Apostles Creed; image of the "Good Shepherd" (John 10:11-16) is a great motivating vision, and the "Great Commission" (Matthew 28: 18-20) is generally accepted as the purposeful mission. Together these define the boundaries of behaviour, conviction, anticipation, and hope within which small group participants can do and say anything ... but beyond which they cannot go.

Congregational DNA is the primary vehicle of accountability for the life of an entire church. Embedding this trust in the small group ensures that the group is always part of the church, and never risks “spinning out” of the church in way that compromises the integrity of the church. Since these are universally applied norms, any member of a group can hold any other member of the group accountable for their behaviour and spiritual practices *without* making it seem like a personality conflict. It's not about “me” and “you” ... it's about “us”.

Imagine you are visiting our group for the first time. Using a scale of 1 (“poor”) to 10 (“perfect”):

- How effectively do we model love, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control?
- How articulately do we talk about the basic beliefs of our church?
- How closely aligned is the activity of our group with the vision of our church?

2. Covenant:

Every small group has a covenant. It is usually written, and then signed by participants. This allows the group leader to hold participants accountable for their participation. It is a basis for the leader to intervene privately or publicly if trust seems threatened. At the top of the page is the commitment: *Yes! I am ready to enjoy our affinity ... go deeper in relationship to God and one another ... and committed to honour our shared DNA!* The covenant names the purpose of the group, time limits, location, membership, any key expectation, and the leadership.

For example, my "Gardening with God Group" is committed to grow flowers and vegetables as the deepen intimacy with one another and God. They will meet every Saturday morning, in somebody's backyard, from April 15 to Sept. 15. The vegetables will all be given to the Food Bank and the flowers will all be given to newcomers. Anyone can join at any time, and Sally is the leader.

Or for example, my "Prescription Drug Addiction Recovery Group" is committed to support one another getting clean and clear by the grace of God. They will meet every Friday night in the most sound-proof room of the church building for as long as it takes. The group can't be larger than 15 people and no observers allowed. The leader may change over time, but every leader will be required to take a course in drug intervention at the local Community College.

The Small Group Covenant is shared in advance, so that anyone who joins a group is clear what they are getting into. No gardening next door neighbour will ever join a group and then be surprise when the pray; no senior citizen addicted to prescription drugs will ever worry that a work associate will hear about their struggles.

Imagine the pastor stops you in the hallway and asks: *How's it going with your small group?* Using a scale of 1 ("terrible") to 10 ("terrific")

- How eager are we to meet together?
- How disciplined are we to start and stop on time?
- How intentional are we to communicate and coach one another?
- How flexible are we to adapt our group process to for the changing lifestyles of participants?

3. Confidentiality

In addition to the Covenant, many small groups require participants to "sign off" on a statement of confidentiality. They may also intentionally train confidentiality at the beginning and in the middle of the group timeline. If you think about the examples above, you realize that the statement of confidentiality may be less or more strict depending on the affinity of the group. However, a good confidentiality always includes a commitment never to gossip about or denigrate group members; and always to ask permission before quoting a participant outside the group. The single clear exception is that the group leader is permitted to share any concerns about safety, health, or illegal activity directly with the pastor.

One way that a small group leader can embed congregational DNA into a group, and remind group participants of the covenant and commitment to confidentiality, is to create a laminated bookmark that is given to each person. It can be easily placed in a Bible or wallet, and become a visual aid in every meeting when the group gathers. On one side of the bookmark is the "Congregational DNA", and on the other side is the unique covenant and confidentiality statement for that group.

Imagine your best friend is thinking about joining the group, and asks: *Can I really be honest?* Using a scale of 1 ("anxious") to 10 ("confident")

- Are we sure that group members can keep secrets?
- Are we sure that group members will always accept one another without being judgemental?
- Are we sure that group members will keep one another safe and secure?

Functional Ways to Embed Trust

I also include sample evaluation questions for the last three functional categories. Here I prefer to simply reflect on their experience in the group, and “popcorn” ideas and insights. If there isn’t much “pop” to the “popcorn”, then the group leader knows the group needs to work harder building relationships and deepening faith. If ideas and insights are “popping” everywhere, from everyone, that is a good sign that the Holy Spirit is working powerfully in the group. Look for patterns (which reveal positive spiritual trends) and anomalies (which reveal prophetic spiritual insights).

4. Collective Memory

Story telling is one of the most effective ways to embed trust. People always ask: *What would trust (or distrust) look like?* It is helpful for the leader to be able to tell a key story that illustrates both the intentionality and the courage of trustful behaviour ... or tell a key story that illustrates how a breach of trust can result from inattention or malice. If the small group has a long timeline, or if it re-gathers each year, there is often a collective memory of group members than can be shared with new participants. These are the stories "told around the campfire" (so to speak) that help newcomers understand and adapt to the Christian culture of the group. The best stories are actually true stories from the history of that group (or other church groups). Avoid identifying individuals, and make sure that all stories have a positive or redemptive ending. Even if it is a story of broken trust, the conclusion of the story should illustrate healthy intervention, the joy of forgiveness and acceptance, and restored trust.

Take five minutes of silent prayer and reflection, and then share together:

- What is the best illustration of growth in your friendships over the past three months?
- What is the best illustration of growth in your faith over the past three months?
- What is the most memorable thing said or done in our group that you will cherish for a long time?

5. Mentor and Model

It is crucial for the small group leader to demonstrate trust in his or her personal behaviour. Leaders consciously model trusting behaviour whenever the opportunity arises. For example, during a Bible study group a participant suddenly, and tearfully, opened up about a personal experience of moral impropriety and forgiveness. The leader listened without judgement, wept, thanked God ... and deliberately promised to keep this personal revelation strictly confidential. Hearing this intentional reminded, other group members followed with assurance.

The small group leader should constantly look for opportunities to clarify, remind, or coach individual participants in their behaviour. If the leader has a concern, he or she should invite the individual privately for coffee, in a neutral and safe place, to informally discuss the issue and help the individual understand and correct their behaviour. Occasionally there may need to be a private reconciliation among group members, brokered by the leader; but most often individuals become aware and step up in their integrity and spirituality.

Take five minutes of silent prayer and reflection, and recall a personal turning point or key growth spurt that occurred inside the group ... but influences your life outside the group:

- What happened?
- Who help precipitate the event?
- How has it changed your way of life?

6. Repetitive Prayer

Prayer is always a part of small group life. It can take many forms, and accomplish many purposes, depending on the affinity of the group. However, it is helpful to embed trust through specific repetitive prayers that reiterate core values and beliefs, and reinforce commitments to cherish the well-being of each member of the group. The most effective prayers are memorized and repeated regularly. They may begin or end a group meeting. They help participants remember, recommit, and take responsibility before God. For example, one group intentionally imitated the wording and cadence of the Serenity Prayer and close every meeting with the unison prayer: *"God grant me the confidence to trust my friends; the courage to live up to their confidence in me; and the wisdom to surrender to your will."*

Repeat the prayer you always use to start or finish a group meeting. :

- What part of the prayer makes my heart leap?
- What part of the prayer perplexes me the most?
- Is my prayer life apart from the group the same or better than before I joined the group?

Small group leaders often get so involved in group activities, or in the content of group discussions, or in the management of group meetings, that they forget to build trust. This is why a Small Group Coordinator or pastor regularly meets with small group leaders to hold them accountable for trust. They will ask questions like:

- *Have you protected trust in your group?*
- *Have you distributed the bookmark to celebrate DNA and define covenant?*
- *Have you reinforced trust with great stories and repetitive prayers?*

The Small Group Coordinator or Pastor will ask periodically through the life of your small group:

- *Is there any risk of a breach of trust?*
- *Can I help you find a new way to model or mentor trust for any immature person or difficult situation?*

The Small Group Coordinator or Pastor can give the leader any feedback that might tarnish the reputation of the group, or that might be celebrated in the life of the group. If you use questions like those suggested above, the small group leader will be better able to identify progress and plateaus the pastor or coordinator. You can celebrate the former, and plan strategically to overcome the latter.

The bottom line is that the most lasting impact of a small group on any participant is the joy of trust. Group participants may forget the particular activity of the group. Their memory might be hazy about the Bible passages read, or the workbook used, or the people involved, or even the particular ways they personally grew in relationships and faith. Yet the one thing they will always remember is the memory of trust. They will cherish the experience of honesty and acceptance, and carry the experience of trust into all the rest of their relationships in life.

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