

Start, Fill, and Keep

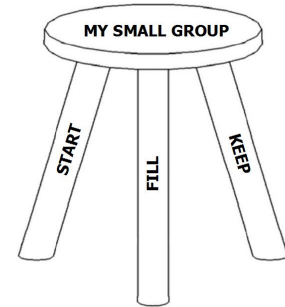
Three simple concepts that will make your group more successful

By Alan Danielson

Being a small-group leader can be overwhelming. Deciding when and where to meet; choosing, acquiring, and understanding curriculum; finding people for your group; connecting with new group members; communicating with the group—is your head spinning yet?

Don't panic. Launching your [new] small group well can be boiled down into three simple principles: Start, Fill, and Keep. Think about it like a three-legged stool. It can only stand if all three legs are of equal strength and equal length. In order for your small group stool to stand, all three legs (Start, Fill, and Keep) must likewise be equal strength and equal length.

Starting is about preparing for the launch of your group. Filling is about finding people for your group. And keeping is about creating a group where people want to remain for the long haul. If you don't focus enough attention on one or more of these three legs, your stool will ultimately come crashing down.



Start

Starting your group well is about just that: starting. The problem is that many people aren't ready to start their group because a solid start requires preparation. Passion is good, but preparation necessary.

So how do you prepare to start your group? First, pray. Pray that God will prepare your heart. Pray that he will empower you to lead. Pray that you will endure. Jim Egli and Dwight Marable recently released the results of a study they conducted with over 3,000 small-group leaders in 200 churches; they found that, statistically, the most important ingredient for successful small-group leaders is prayer. The following quote from their book [Small Groups Big Impact](#) is very telling:

We were surprised to discover that the amount of time spent preparing the Bible lesson shows no correlation whatsoever to small group growth. In other words, the leaders who spend five hours preparing the Bible lesson for their groups have groups that grow no faster than leaders who spend five minutes preparing the lesson! It does make a dramatic difference, however, how much time the leaders spends praying for his small group meeting.

Second, practice the "Marriott Principle." Have you ever had someone show up to your home unannounced? It's nice to have guests, but if you're not ready it's a bit unnerving. Marriott (and all good hotels) are always ready for guests. Make sure that you are ready to receive people when they come to your group. There's nothing more awkward for new group members than to show up and feel like they are an inconvenience. If your group meets in a home, make sure it looks like someone is home. Open the curtains/blinds and turn on a porch light. Make sure that there is enough seating. If you're going to serve snacks, have them ready early. New people will feel strange sitting in your living room while you are finishing up in the kitchen. If you're using video curriculum, place the TV where everyone will be able to see the screen.

Ultimately, just pay attention to details. Walk through your meeting location as if you were a first time guest. Ask yourself what makes the environment welcoming and what makes it a bit awkward. Enhance the welcoming elements and eliminate the awkward ones.

Fill

Sadly, some small-group leaders think, "If I build it, they will come." Nothing could be further from the truth. Filling out a form at church, meeting with a pastor or coach, and putting your group information on the church list is not a guarantee that people will come to your group. So how do you fill your group with people?

First of all, take ownership of filling the group. Don't leave it to the staff, your church website, a group catalog, or the small-groups booth in the lobby. No one will care more about filling your group than you, so own that

responsibility. Secondly, adjust your expectations. Resist the idea that a successful group has 20 people. The biblical standard is two, three, or more (Matthew 18:20). If two or three are all you are able to recruit, thank God for the group he's given you!

Once you have owned the responsibility for filling your group and managed your expectations, you should take the following steps:

- *Pray.* Pray about who God wants in your group. Pray that God will guide you to the right people. Pray that he will give you the right opportunities to find and invite those people.
- *Make invite cards.* When you invite someone to the group, make sure you give them something tangible that tells them when and where your group will meet.
- *Look around for existing groups.* The next step is to ask yourself, "Who do I already 'group' with?" There are already people you regularly gather with in small groups. Your gaming group, a book club, other parents at little league games, your exercise partners, and your family are great examples of this. Ask the people you are already spending time with if they would like to be a part of your small group.
- *Look for "church neighbors."* Lastly, think about the people who sit near you at church. People are creatures of habit, so the people who sit near you at church probably sit in that general area every time they come. Capitalize on their habitual behavior. Tap them on the shoulder this weekend, hand them an invite to your group, and ask them to come.

Filling your group may take you outside your comfort zone, but that's a good thing. That stretching may be the next important step in your own spiritual development. Don't try to bypass God's work in your own life by just expecting people to come to your group.

Keep

Keeping people in your group is about creating "sticky" relationships. If the relational bond is strong, your group will be able to weather tough times and people will be less likely to jump ship. The first key in creating this bond is (surprise!) prayer. This not only refers to the leader's commitment to praying for the group, but to the group's commitments to praying for one another. Praying aloud for one another's needs fosters a true sense of caring. Sharing those needs outside the group time and praying for them regularly helps group members show genuine interest in one another. Praying for each other leads to group members taking action, becoming answers to prayer for one another.

The second important factor for keeping people is communication. Technology is a tremendous help with this. Copying the entire group via email is a simple, yet effective, communication tool. Starting a Facebook group and having everyone communicate via social media is also very effective. The bottom line is that people need and want to know what's going on. When people feel like outsiders, they are more likely to leave your group.

The third key for keeping people in your group is being on mission together. Groups who serve the lost together, stay together. This is what I call the "Band of Brothers Effect." Something interesting happens in wartime: those who are in combat together share a unique and unbreakable bond. Make no mistake—the members of your group are involved in a spiritual war, and nothing is more uniting for a group than to reach out to a dying world together. We see this clearly in the way that Jesus led his own small group. When he recruited his disciples he called them to "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). He called the 12 to an active, on-mission-discipleship. Whatever you do, don't make the mistake of missing out on this key ingredient of keeping people in your group. Mission is absolutely necessary.

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