



facilitating

7.2 the art of facilitating: how can we lead with three?

the **big** idea

A triad approach to small group leadership sets everyone up for success.

ice breaker

Describe a task that you performed or a problem you solved with two other people. What did you notice about the relationship among the three of you? How is working with three different from doing something with only two?

related Scripture

A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken. Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NLT)

challenging wisdom

Without question, the setting where I have experienced the most accelerated transformation in the lives of believers has been in triads, or small reproducible discipleship groups. I call them the hothouse of spiritual growth. Hothouses maximize the environmental conditions so that living things can grow at a rate greater than would exist under normal circumstances.¹
 – Greg Ogden

Triads offer triple-strength leadership

In the 1940s, famed architect Buckminster Fuller declared the triangle to be the perfect form for designing strong, light, economical buildings. Fuller observed that the simplicity of the three-sided shape achieves maximum efficiency with minimum structural effort. In fact, a triangle is more than twice as strong as a rectangle—its unique configuration allows it to bear stresses that other shapes simply can't. Based on this principle, Fuller designed incredible structures that simply wouldn't have been possible without the fundamental strength of triangles.

Just like great buildings, great small groups require a well-designed approach to leadership that not only withstands the challenges of leading a group but also thrives in the midst of those challenges.

1	discuss
<p>Based on your experience in small groups, what do you think is the best design for small group leadership, and why?</p>	

The demands of group life can be overwhelming. Solo facilitation casts the facilitator as a small group superhero who has x-ray vision into group dynamics, heroic power to invite people to the group, and the ability to leap over discussion-ending comments in a single bound. But who facilitates the group when the leader is out of town or sick? What happens when the leader starts to burn out or has to work late? How can the leader invite people into the group beyond his or her social circle?

¹Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 153.

A partnership of two facilitators alleviates some of the challenges of solo facilitation, but tends to promote a hierarchical leader/apprentice model. The less experienced facilitator often defers to the more experienced leader, reducing his or her contribution to the group. And in small group discussions, the group tends to value the primary leader’s input over the apprentice’s input.

By contrast, with a triad of leadership, three people partner together to maximize each other’s strengths, support each other through the ups and downs of group life, and model the sort of community they want to see in the group they lead.

2	discuss
<p>If you have been in a small group with three facilitators, how did that compare to a small group experience with just one or two leaders? (If not, how do you think a small group experience you have had would have been different with a triad of leadership?)</p>	

There’s no such thing as a perfect group facilitator—every facilitator has strengths and weaknesses. A facilitator may be great at inviting people to the group, but struggle to lead discussions. A facilitator may have great empathy, but shy away from addressing deep

issues for fear of group conflict. A facilitator may be great at asking questions, but weak at waiting to hear answers. And, whatever their gift mix, every facilitator has good days and bad days, moments when they lead well and moments when they don’t.

No matter the strengths and weaknesses of individual facilitators, triad leadership fosters greater success and greater synergy through the power of partnership. The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes describes this power and highlights the unique advantages of three working together:

Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.... A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NLT).

3	discuss
<p>How might you apply Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, with its imagery of a triple-braided cord, to leadership in a small group?</p>	

Every facilitator wants to succeed in leading a group. But no one facilitator has all the answers or the perspective to evaluate how the group is doing. And at one point or another, every leader finds that they get stalled—stuck in a relational challenge, overwhelmed by other pressures in life, frustrated with the momentum of a discussion.

A triad of facilitators can support each other both inside and outside of the small group setting. For example, when the group discussion bogs down, one of them may offer a new question or point the group back to its guidelines. Outside of the group, facilitators can debrief, offering each other specific affirmation and constructive suggestions for future group sessions.

The triad leadership approach allows each facilitator to use his or her strengths and look to others to compensate for weaknesses. As a result, he or she will feel more at home in the facilitating role and better valued for what he or she brings to the group.

More than anything, triad leadership says “we’re in this together.” In a triad, facilitators share “warmth”—encouragement, prayer, ideas, support, wisdom. Triad leadership lives out the idea that we can do more together than we could ever do alone.

4	discuss
<p>What resonates with you regarding the success and synergy of starting a small group with two other people?</p>	
<p>What seems foreign to you, based on your previous small group experiences?</p>	

Triads model discipleship in community

Effective group facilitators strive to provide an environment that is conducive for exploration and discovery, where people who believe differently can explore, discover, and share with transparency while the Spirit of God works through Scripture. As they create this environment for others, they need it also for themselves.

As the adage goes, “You can’t give away what you don’t have.” If a facilitator isn’t being discipled in a loving community, that facilitator is ill-equipped to disciple others in a loving community. A triad lives out the idea of peer-discipleship, of “iron sharpening iron” (Proverbs 27:17).

Jesus modeled this community-within-a-community approach; while investing in all twelve apostles, he gave extra attention to the triad of Peter, James, and John. Jesus exclusively invited them into specific highs and lows of his ministry—the resurrection of a little girl (Mark 5:37-42), the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13), and his night of prayer at Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-34).

Surely Peter, James, and John talked together about these experiences. That processing-in-community perfectly captures the essence of a triad—meeting together to work through our responses to Jesus and partnering together in the Kingdom work Jesus gives us to do. Triad meetings outside of small group meetings offer a rich discipleship environment for facilitators.

5	discuss
<p>Why do you think Jesus had an inner circle of Peter, James, and John among his twelve apostles?</p>	

To start a small group, start a triad. To lead a small group, lead as a triad.

The idea of starting a small group can be overwhelming. *Where will I find enough people to be in the group? What should we discuss? How will I deal with challenging group members?*

It’s far easier to start a triad. Then you have the foundation for a group. Go through the same four stages: preparation, invitation, trial meeting, and growth.

- 1. Preparation.** Through prayer and reflection, ask God to point you toward acquaintances, friends, or even strangers who might consider being a part of a triad. While triad members can be close friends, they certainly don’t have to be. In fact, your triad will be energized by including people you don’t know well.
- 2. Invitation.** Initiate individual conversations with potential triad members over coffee or lunch. Briefly explain why you thought of them as potential triad members, and share some of your hopes for a small group that you three could start.
- 3. Trial meeting.** Invite them to join you for a trial triad meeting. At the meeting, spend some time getting to know each other, discuss the triad model of leadership, and talk about a future small group. If you sense chemistry in the group and both facilitators sign on, move ahead to the next step. If not, return to stage 1.
- 4. Growth.** Establish a pattern for regularly meeting together. Continue to get to know each other as you move toward launching your small group. Share the names of people you’d each like to see join the group, and pray for those people together. Set the place and time for the trial meeting of your small group, and hold each other accountable to extend invitations to that meeting.

Once you launch a small group, continue to meet together as a triad to evaluate how the group is doing, to pray for each other and the group, and to consider whom else to invite. Share leadership by rotating responsibility for the small group from week to week.

The high calling of small group leadership is too important to do alone. Triad leadership offers a strong discipleship-based model for starting and leading a small group. Beyond all these benefits, it’s simply more fun to lead, celebrate, and grow in community!

6	discuss
<p>What benefits do you see in starting with a triad of facilitators before launching a small group? Challenges?</p>	
<p>Do you think the foundation of a triad of facilitators might increase the likelihood of new groups starting? Why or why not?</p>	

Practice on Your Own

This week take some time to list the attributes of a person you'd consider inviting to join you in a triad for the purpose of launching a small group. Write down the reasons that these attributes are important to you. Spend some time in prayer and write down any individuals who come to mind. Pray for those people and ask God for guidance to start a triad for discipleship and facilitation of a small group.

Getting the Big Idea

A team of three offers unique strength that's perfectly suited to the demands of starting and facilitating a small group. A triad provides an ideal climate for spiritual growth as you are mutually accountable, transparent, and supportive, applying Scripture and depending on God together in the process of leading a small group.

Resources to Check Out

- *Christianity Beyond Belief* by Todd Hunter (InterVarsity Press, 2009)
- *How to Start a Q Place* by Mary Schaller (Q Place, 2008)
- *Life Groups at Cedar Hills* by Eric Rust (Plaudit Press, 2012)
- *Transforming Discipleship* by Greg Ogden (InterVarsity Press, 2003)

Q Place Story

Michelle was inspired to start a small group for people in her community, so she prayed for God to show her two people who would join her. Later that month, she met with two friends from her church to see if they wanted to start a triad and then launch a spiritual conversation group with her. Nicholas and Karen were intrigued.

The first time the three got together they spent time getting acquainted at a deeper level, sharing their fears and apprehensions as well as their excitement about reaching out to people outside the church. The next time, each one brought a list of acquaintances who might be interested in coming to a group to discuss questions about God. After describing each person on their lists, they committed to pray for each one. They also shared their reservations: Karen wasn't sure she had time to add one more activity to her schedule; Nicholas,

a pastor, recognized his tendency to teach rather than facilitate and was afraid that it might be awkward for him to be in a group like this; Michelle was traveling a lot with her job and wasn't sure if she had the time or consistency to make this group happen. They all agreed to pray for each other. They also decided to connect intentionally with the people on their lists and meet every couple of weeks to share what was happening.

Four months later, this triad had seen God do amazing things in their relationships with the people on their lists. He had also united their triad, and they were now ready to do this! They extended personal invitations, had their first Q Place meeting, and were thrilled to see their group not only become a reality, but lead to transformation in the lives of everyone in their group—including their own.

the **arts** of spiritual conversations™

Getting Ready: Noticing, Praying, Listening

Getting Started: Asking Questions, Loving, Welcoming

Keeping It Going: Facilitating, Serving Together, Sharing

These nine surprisingly simple practices build a foundation of relational trust and open the gateway for conversations about God to unfold naturally. The goal of the Arts curriculum is to help Christians cultivate ongoing spiritual conversations.

Each module in the Arts series could be used:

1. By individuals who desire vibrant spiritual conversations with those around them
2. In a triad of facilitators getting ready to launch a Q Place
3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.