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Supporting Potential Small-Group Leaders

How to deepen relationships with group members by filling their emotional tanks.

by Dave Earley

When my boys were little, they had a toy lawn mower. When my oldest son was about three, he was in the phase of doing everything Dad did. One extremely hot Saturday afternoon, I got out my big mower. He got out his little mower. I pulled the string to start my mower. He pulled the imaginary string to start his. I began to cut the grass, and he followed behind me, pushing his mower.

When my mower stopped, he stopped. When I pulled the string and nothing happened, he pulled the imaginary string on his mower and nothing happened. When I kicked my mower, he kicked his mower. When I finally figured out I was out of gas and poured some gas into my mower, he poured imaginary gas into his mower.

I was reminded of two lessons that day. First, be careful what you say when you kick the lawn mower, because little ears are going to hear it and little boys may say it, too. Second, engines won't work without fuel.

Since then I've been reminded that, in some ways, relationships are like engines. They don't go far without emotional fuel. However, when the tanks are full, relationships go well, and advice and instruction are easily received. When the tanks are low, relationships and development efforts sputter.

Wise multipliers work hard to keep the emotional tanks of their potential leaders on "full." Fortunately, there are many ways to do this. Think of them as "emotional tank fillers."

1. **Acceptance.** Acceptance is like a magnet. It attracts people to you. One of the awesome things about small groups is everyone can feel accepted there. I help lead a group of ninth and tenth graders. One of the things I love about our group is that we have a wonderful mix of kids. Some are very popular at school and some are completely unknown. We have clean-cut athletes, young men with long scraggly hair, and "straight A" marching band kids. We have one girl who dyes her hair a different neon color every few weeks and one young man who failed every class his first time through ninth grade. And they all feel acceptance from one another. As a result, they keep coming back and bringing their friends.

   Every potential leader is different. Each of us has different strengths and weaknesses. We all have different personalities. Be certain to communicate acceptance to potential leaders, and they'll be attracted to you. If you don't have this attitude naturally, ask God for it. He is an accepting God (he accepted me and you, after all). He can give you his heart of acceptance for people.

2. **Attention.** When children's emotional tanks are low, they show it. Often, they do things to get attention. When I was in first grade, I had a friend who was a very bright, athletic kid. But he was kind of lost in the shuffle of his parents' divorce. One day he coerced me into joining him in swinging around the boys' bathroom from stall to stall screaming like a monkey. Naturally a teacher heard us, and we got sent to the principal's office. He asked my friend why he'd done such a thing. He smiled and simply said, "To get attention."

Of course, most of your leaders won't play the fool or act silly to get your attention. But that doesn't mean they don't need it. In order to help keep the tanks of our potential leaders full, we need to give them attention. It doesn't usually take very long, but it does make a big difference.

Learn to be the giver of attention. Look at people when they speak. Read between the lines when they share concerns. Show interest in their jobs, their families, and their health. Ask about their day. Notice if they seem distracted or down. Pay more attention to them, and they'll pay more attention to you.

3. **Affirmation.** Affirming others builds relationships and motivates better performance. Be sure to affirm your potential leaders. Go out of your way to express confidence in them. Show public trust in their abilities and character. Affirm their passion, skills, and efforts.

4. **Affection.** I spent one year training a pilot group of small-group leaders. All the men in my group were older than I, and very committed Christians. One man had grown up in an alcoholic home, and affection was a very difficult thing for him. He was usually critical of what I was doing as a young pastor. He also worked with our teenagers and was critical of our youth pastor, as well. So the youth pastor and I decided to try to "love him out of it." We both began to give him more affection. Our youth pastor took the physical approach by hugging him, and I took the verbal approach.

   One night, I was giving him a ride home from our group. As he got out of the car I said, "Don't forget, I love you, man." He just looked at me and got out. The next week, I said the same thing. "Don't forget, I love you, man." He paused for awhile, then slowly said, "Well, my wife likes your wife a lot." And got out. The next week I gave it another shot. "Don't forget, I love you, man." He dropped his head and I noticed a tear on his cheek. Our youth pastor had been doing the same thing, and the power of our affection was getting through. "I, uh," he stammered and gulped hard, "I love you, too."

   After that he was a different man. He was still very disciplined and highly committed. But the hard edge had been replaced with warmth. He went from being a critic to an advocate. In fact, he later moved to another state and drove his new pastor to distraction telling him all the good things our youth pastor and I were doing!

   So learn to give your potential leaders appropriate affection. It fills their tanks and enhances your relationship. Tell them. Show them. An appropriate handshake, pat on the back, or hug will go a long way in letting people know you love them.

5. **Activities.** A good rule of thumb is to never do ministry alone. Whenever possible, do things together. I travel and minister with a degree of frequency. I've learned to take the important people in my life with me. My last trip I took my middle son, who is also an apprentice for my high school group. The trip before that I went with two young church planters I try to mentor. My next trip, I'll take my wife.

   Try to do ministry together. Visit the hospital, do follow-up, and pray together. Go to training classes or seminars together. Try to have fun together. Sometimes it's not important what you do, but that you do it together. Some of our male leaders love to eat breakfast, golf, go to a ball game, or fish together. Some of our lady leaders enjoy shopping, cooking, or decorating together. The guys on our staff like to play

basketball together. We used to play paint ball and disc golf together. A few times we went bowling or played board games.

Simply put—doing activities together fills tanks and deepens relationships.

6. **Assistance.** Bonds are created when we help each other. I'm not good at home repairs, so I deeply appreciate the guys who give me assistance with them. I'm a klutz with computers, so I appreciate people like Jack who help make my work easier. I'm better at coaching kids, so guys appreciate it when I pick their sons to be on my team and make them assistant coaches.

   Look for ways to help out. Some of our leaders have built bridges to potential leaders by babysitting for them, helping them balance their checkbooks, or assisting them in moving from one home to another. Assistance fills emotional tanks and deepens relationships.

—Dave Earley; excerpted from chapter four of Turning Members into Leaders. Used with permission. Published by TOUCH Publications, Houston, Texas. 1-800-735-5865