

Share the Wealth: Freeing Your Inner Facilitator

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“I have been my whole life a bell and never knew it until the moment I was lifted and struck.” Annie Dillard

As I talk with small group ministry members and leaders, **one of their major concerns is wanting to become more comfortable with facilitation.** I can certainly identify. When I found myself in the position of facilitating my first women’s group about twenty years ago, I felt both intimidated and energized by the challenge. I felt a weight of responsibility to somehow see to it that everyone in the group had a reasonably positive experience.

When I got introduced to the idea of shared leadership, my understanding of myself and the other group members shifted. **Shared leadership is when each person in the group contributes in some way to the well-being of the group.** Contributing can mean any number of things including bringing an opening reading or a snack, putting a notice about the group in the church newsletter, or facilitating a meeting.

I have come to see shared leadership as the key to an effective group. Ed Madara and colleagues at the American Self-Help Clearinghouse conducted research on small groups that indicated that groups with shared leadership have greater longevity than groups with a more traditional or hierarchical leadership style. As I think about it, this makes sense.

For the groups with a lone ranger type of leadership, when that lone leader gets tired, or ill, or just can’t attend to the group, the group is more likely to collapse. And lone-ranger leaders **are** more likely to burn out. By contrast, a group with shared leadership is more stable and less dependent for its existence and health on the presence any single member. So, groups with shared leadership are more likely to be around for a while.

Longevity is not the only measure or even necessarily a meaningful measure of a successful group, however. There’s more to it than that.

Something magical happens when we actually contribute to the wellbeing of another -- we, ourselves grow. Whether that other is a plant, a family member or our small group members, we feel the benefit when our attention and effort help another being. When a person contributes their time, attention and caring to the group, that person feels more of a sense of belonging in the group and more of a sense of empowerment. When a member is invited to or steps into a leadership activity, he may discover previously untapped resources within himself or previously unrecognized dimensions of himself. Annie Dillard says it well in the opening quote. In groups with shared leadership, each member has a sense of commitment, ownership and investment in the group -- it is after all their group. They see themselves as vital members of the group and not guests in the group.

I sense that groups with shared leadership have an extra verve and dynamism. They are buzzing with the creativity and contributions of their members. The energy of such a group lifts the burden of facilitation. The responsibility of facilitation becomes a lighter duty freely shared among the membership. Given that shared leadership is so important, **how do we cultivate it in our groups?**