
ASCENT COMMUNITY CHURCH

Core Group Leader Training

Section 1: Foundations

Module 1: Why Core Groups Matter

Why Core Groups Matter

Relationships are essential

OVERVIEW

Ascent has always valued relationships and community. One of our key values is “personal” and we want this to be a church that never wavers on its commitment to helping anyone who wants to find a place to belong. Through Core Groups, everyone at Ascent has an easy way to build lasting and meaningful friendships, to grow deeply in their relationship with Jesus and to find their place to belong. The life lived with Jesus is the very best life possible and Core Groups offer people a way to unlock it!

HIGHLIGHTS

4 ways that Core Groups help people get connected and grow spiritually.

- From Rows to Circles - Everything we can get from a Sunday morning is amplified in a core group.
- From Weekly to Daily - Core groups help people establish daily spiritual rhythms by:
 - Providing the material
 - Accountability
 - A place to ask questions
- Care and Healing - Immediate community is always the best source of care in hard times.
- From “Bonus” to Transformative - When Jesus becomes foundational, faith becomes transformative.

READING

1. Required Reading: “Small Group Leader: You’re Changing Lives” by Michael C. Mack
2. Further/Suggested Reading
 - a. “The Value of Shared Life” by Kim Hammond and Darren Cronshaw
 - b. “Work and the Loneliness Epidemic” by Vivek Murthy

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where is your loneliness gauge? Do you feel well connected and supported in personal relationships or is this an area where you feel a need?
2. What have been the most impactful things in your growth spiritually? When was it? Who was with you? What made them so impactful?
3. How do you feel about your regular rhythm with Jesus right now? What works best for you in connecting to Jesus?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

HEBREWS 10:24-25

24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.



May 8, 2019

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The following article is located at: <https://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2012/small-group-leader-youre-changing-lives.html>

SmallGroups.com, November, 2012

Small-Group Leader: You're Changing Lives!

What you do has eternal significance.

Michael C. Mack | posted November 5, 2012

I thank God for a couple named Mark and Lyric who led a small group in Dayton, Ohio, nearly 25 years ago. I learned from these leaders and this group how to live as a Christian. They showed me how to study God's Word, disciplined me, loved me, prayed for me, and became my good friends.

Mark and Lyric started that group and led it because that's what God called them to do. They didn't know what God would do with their faithfulness. They couldn't possibly have seen the impact they would have.

Your Important Role

Just like Mark and Lyric, what you do as a small-group leader has eternal significance, whether you see it or not. You are in the life-change business. When you build authentic Biblical community, you're building the kind of church Jesus dreamed about—the kind where people take off their masks and become vulnerable to the group and to God, where the group dives into God's Word to understand it and live it out, where people grow more and more like Christ every day and begin to step out to lead others, and where people get out of their comfort zones to live by faith and to impact the world around them.

Do you understand the important role you have? You are a minister of reconciliation, and Christ's ambassador (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). You are a servant of the most high God, administering his grace through your leadership (1 Peter 4:10). You are in the most strategic position in the church to bring about real, lasting life change in people's lives. You are on the frontlines of ministry, engaged in a spiritual battle for people's hearts and minds. You are touching people's lives directly, face to face and heart to heart, and you are making an impact for God in the world.

Does that seem huge to you? Do you ever feel like you're in over your head? You're not the only one to feel that way. But God has given you a big mission—a mission so large that there's no way you can accomplish it in your own power. And that's the point! God continually move us outside what we can accomplish on our own. He wants us to depend on him completely, so he gives us a mission that seems impossible in many ways.

Instead of feeling overwhelmed, though, remember that your part of the mission is simply to be *faithful* to it—to make it your priority while you're in this world. God will take care of the rest. He will make an impact and change lives through you. I love how Mother Teresa put it: "I'm a little pencil in the hand of a writing God, who is sending a love letter to the world."

And that's what Mark and Lyric did. They were instruments in the hands of God. When I lost my job, they prayed with me. When I questioned what God wanted me to do with my life, they encouraged me to step out on faith. And just three months later, when I was heading to seminary, they helped me pack.

Real Change

As a small-group minister, I've had the opportunity to hear other amazing stories of support and life change through small groups. One leader in our church witnessed the baptism of eight people from his group in a two-month period. This leader walked with his group through numerous unbelievably tough situations, including broken marriages and the loss of a teenage child. The group leader ministered to these families in their time of crisis, helping them to keep their eyes on Christ.

In another group, a young mom had surgery to remove an ovarian cyst. The same week, her 4-year-old daughter had her ninth set of tubes put in her ears. The small group prayed for them, visited them at the hospital, and brought them food at home, caring for their physical health as well as their spiritual health.

A salesman in another group had to keep turning down sales appointments because his family only had one working vehicle. A member of his small group had just purchased a new car, so he gave the salesman his used car. This empowered the salesman to continue working in order to support his family.

A couple from another group moved from Louisville to Delaware. Two months later, the wife had surgery, so people from the group drove the 12-hour trip to be with her and her family. The sacrifice this group offered spoke volumes to the family.

All these groups were led by ordinary leaders who served an extraordinary God. I believe every small-group leader can have this kind of impact. You can't make it happen, but God will multiply your faithfulness and your wholehearted work as you are involved in his mission.

Let me encourage you, leader: Don't give up! What you do is way too important. Like Mark, Lyric, and all these group leaders, what you do has eternal significance.

—Michael Mack is founder of SmallGroups.com, and author of several books including, [Small Group Vital Signs](#); used with permission from the author.



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The following article is located at: <https://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2014/value-of-shared-life.html>

SmallGroups.com, September, 2014

The Value of Shared Life

Why we need to value life-on-life relationships more

Kim Hammond and Darren Cronshaw | posted September 15, 2014

There I sat, in a chair in the tattoo parlor, gazing at the assorted pictures and photos across the walls. Each one represented a mark on some person's body. Some were intricate and meaningful, others angry and violent, still others just silly. I (Kim) handed the artist a piece of paper with my choice for my tattoo: one word, *diatribo*.

"What's it say?" he asked, then tried to pronounce it.

"It's Greek," I said.

"What's it mean?" he asked.

"It literally means 'to rub between, to rub hard.' For me it means a shared life."

The artist smiled and began to prepare the apparatus. I am sure he had heard thousands of explanations for why people put particular words on their skin.

"Which way do you want it?" he asked. "Facing out, or is it for you to read?"

"This one's for me."

"Why this word?" he asked casually.

Why this word? It was used in the Bible to reflect shared life—abiding with one another, skin rubbing up against skin. Jesus shared his life with a small group of people. This incredible, kind, wise, loving teacher stuck with a bunch of young scalawags. And, along the way, who he was—his character, his nature—rubbed off on them.

I want to be like Jesus. I want to give my life to helping others. I want people to experience his grace and love and peace. I want Jesus to rub off of me and on to others, and I want Jesus to rub off of others and on to me.

Diatribos is one of my favorite words in the Bible. The English translations—"stayed with," "abided with,"—are insufficient to describe this sacred transaction between people. *Diatribos* is a way of life led by the Savior. I want to live with the same sacrificial purpose—that any good that God has redeemed in me and through me would graciously and generously rub off on others. It reminds me to give priority to relationships and to stay with the people God puts me with, even and maybe especially when staying is hard, when staying hurts.

I love people deeply. All people. A counselor once told me that I feel not only my pain, but also the pain of everyone in the room. I believe and see the best in people, and I make a habit of telling them how valuable they are.

I am not the smartest person in the Forge Mission Training Network. In fact, I am in awe of the authors and international consultants and world-famous preachers I get to work with. However, I have always known I was put on the earth to love others, not with some nominal, superficial, religious love, but with love like Christ's love, a giving of life for others.

Life-on-Life Learning

I was taught that way of loving as a young Christian. I have connected easily with Forge's idea of shared life and discipleship, and mission as a way of life not a program, because that is how I experienced it firsthand as a young person; the youth leader couple in my church invested in me and shared their lives. They were like the big brother and sister I never had. I will always cherish their mentoring of me.

My youth pastor, Steve Swain, took me under his wing and spent time both teaching me about life and showing me how to live. He and his wife, Sonia, opened their home, fed me, and let me sleep over when I needed to. Even their kids embraced me; I was best man in their oldest son's wedding.

Steve was no pushover; there were many tears and hard conversations between us. I could not lie to him because he knew all my thoughts. I'd sit in his office, sweating excessively, as he asked me questions I had no answers to. Steve is one of the most stubborn, straight-talking, confrontational people I have ever met.

Beyond opening his home to me and teaching me about Jesus, Steve took me all over Australia and even overseas to experience mission of the church firsthand. He taught me to talk to kids in the local high school about Jesus and to love those who were slowly finding their way back to God. He gave me my first opportunity to preach in a church—when I was 16.

I wanted to do what Steve did, so when I was 18, I became a pastor and got to work with him as his assistant youth pastor. When I was 20, Steve walked my wife down the aisle at our wedding (Maria's father had passed away several years before). When I was 24, we dreamed together and took the plunge into church planting as we started The Junction. We all knew it would be different because Steve is different, but we never knew how different it would be from your standard church plant.

The mentoring and discipleship that Steve gave me shaped my view of Jesus and how I should follow him. For the first part of our marriage, Maria and I poured ourselves into the lives of the young people at our local church, and then into the young adults and families of our new church plant. We opened our home and ate regularly with people. Whether it was refugees or newlyweds, we gave people time. We shared life with them. And this is how we live our life today.

More than a Friendly Church

When I came to the United States to lead Forge America and work with grassroots missionaries, megachurches, and multisite churches, I wanted to have the same posture. I don't want to belong to a friendly church that doesn't see life as something to be shared. I want the people of God to find and build friendships—lifelong ones. I value shared life.

This is one of the most intangible yet valuable postures of a missionary. It's discipleship in its simplest form. As Mike Breen, director of 3DM, says, the missional church will die without discipleship. Mike and his wife, Sally, lead their organization as if it were their family. That is the ethos of shared life we need in our churches and in our missional teams.

—Taken from *Sentness* by Kim Hammond and Darren Cronshaw. Copyright 2014 by Kim Hammond and Darren Cronshaw. Used by permission of *InterVarsity Press*, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426.

Reflect

1. How much margin do I have in my life for this kind of shared life? What needs to go so I can create more margin?
2. As a leader, how much time and energy do I invest in relationships with group members where real life-on-life action takes place?
3. As a pastor, director, or coach, how can I share life with my leaders in this way?

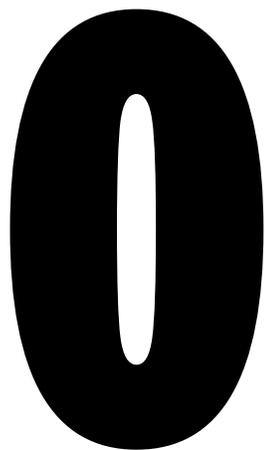


The Dangers of “Mandatory Fun”

DIGITAL ARTICLE

It can make social isolation at work worse.

READ



n August 24, 1992, in the early hours of the morning, my family and I stepped out of our temporary shelter to find our city – and our lives – forever changed. We had spent the past several hours huddled together as Hurricane Andrew battered our South Florida neighborhood with torrential rain and winds near 170 miles per hour. We saw pieces of homes strewn across the landscape, power lines flung about like pieces of string, and sea creatures stranded in trees, having been blown far inland by the storm.

Like thousands of others, we survived the storm and the many dark days that followed because of the kindness of strangers who brought food, water, and comfort. Hurricane Andrew forged a deep sense of connection and community in South Florida as the nation rallied around us and as we supported each other. But slowly, as normal life resumed, the distance between people returned. We went back to our homes, our work, our schools, and our lives, and once again we grew apart.

Looking today at so many other places around the world ravaged by disasters of all kinds, I think about how often tragedy brings us together – and how fleeting that connection often is.

There is good reason to be concerned about social connection in our current world. Loneliness is a growing health epidemic. We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s. Today, over 40% of adults in America report feeling lonely, and research suggests that the real number may well be higher. Additionally, the number of people who report having a close confidante in their lives has been declining over the past few decades. In the workplace, many employees – and half of CEOs – report feeling lonely in their roles.

THE AUTHOR

VIVEK H. MURTHY



Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy ([@vivek_murthy](#)) served as the 19th Surgeon General of the United States, from 2014 to 2017. As Surgeon General, Dr. Murthy commanded the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, a uniformed service of 6,600 public health officers serving vulnerable populations in 800 locations domestically and abroad. During his tenure, he helped address critical public health issues, including the Ebola outbreak, the Zika virus, low rates of physical activity, and the explosion in e-cigarette use among youth. In 2016, he launched the TurnTheTideRx campaign to combat the opioid epidemic.



During my tenure as U.S. surgeon general, I saw firsthand how loneliness affected people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds across the country. I met middle and high school students in urban and rural areas who turned to violence, drugs, and gangs to ease the pain of their loneliness. I sat with mothers and fathers who had lost sons and daughters to drug overdoses and were struggling to cope alone because of the unfortunate stigma surrounding addiction. And I met factory workers, doctors, small business owners, and teachers who described feeling alone in their work and on the verge of burnout.

During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness. The elderly man who came to our hospital every few weeks seeking relief from chronic pain was also looking for human connection: He was lonely. The middle-aged woman

battling advanced HIV who had no one to call to inform that she was sick: She was lonely too. I found that loneliness was often in the background of clinical illness, contributing to disease and making it harder for patients to cope and heal.

This may not surprise you. Chances are, you or someone you know has been struggling with loneliness. And that can be a serious problem. Loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity. But we haven't focused nearly as much effort on strengthening connections between people as we have on curbing tobacco use or obesity. Loneliness is also associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety. At work, loneliness reduces task performance, limits creativity, and impairs other aspects of executive function such as reasoning and decision making. For our health and our work, it is imperative that we address the loneliness epidemic quickly.

Once we understand the profound human and economic costs of loneliness, we must determine whose responsibility it is to address the problem. The government and health care system have important roles to play in helping us understand the impact of loneliness, identifying who is affected, and determining which interventions work. But to truly solve loneliness requires the engagement of institutions where people spend the bulk of their time: families, schools, social organizations, and the workplace. Companies in particular have the power to drive change at a societal level not only by strengthening connections among employees, partners, and clients but also by serving as an innovation hub that can inspire other organizations to address loneliness.

THE ROOTS OF LONELINESS

Loneliness is the subjective feeling of having inadequate social connections. Why has this feeling increased over past decades? Partly because people are more geographically mobile and are thus more likely to be living apart from friends and family. Indeed, more people report living alone today than at any time since the census began collecting this data. In the workplace, new models of working – such as telecommuting and some on-demand “gig economy” contracting arrangements – have created flexibility but often reduce the opportunities for in-person interaction and relationships. And even working at an office doesn't guarantee meaningful connections: People sit in an office full of coworkers, even in open-plan workspaces, but everyone is staring at a computer or attending task-oriented meetings where opportunities to connect on a human level are scarce.

Happy hours, coffee breaks, and team-building exercises are designed to build connections between colleagues, but do they really help people develop deep relationships? On average, we spend more waking hours with our coworkers than we do with our families. But do they know what we really care about? Do they understand our values? Do they share in our triumphs and pains?



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A DAY.

These aren't just rhetorical questions; from a biological perspective, we evolved to be social creatures. Long ago, our ability to build relationships of trust and cooperation helped increase our chances of having a stable food supply and more consistent protection from predators. Over thousands of years, the value of social connection has become baked into our nervous system such that the absence of such a protective force creates a stress state in the body. Loneliness causes stress, and long-term or chronic stress leads to more frequent elevations of a key stress hormone, cortisol. It is also linked to higher levels of inflammation in the body. This in turn damages blood vessels and other tissues, increasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, joint disease, depression, obesity, and premature death. Chronic stress can also hijack your brain's prefrontal cortex, which governs decision making, planning, emotional regulation, analysis, and abstract thinking.

This isn't just bad for our health; it's also bad for business. Researchers for Gallup found that having strong social connections at work makes employees more likely to be engaged with their jobs and produce higher-quality work, and less likely to fall sick or be injured. Without strong social connections, these gains become losses. Connection can also help indirectly by enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy while also shifting our experience toward positive emotions – all of which can buffer an individual during stressful situations and have positive effects on health. Indeed, studies have found that companies whose workers feel they have high-stress jobs have markedly higher health care expenditures than their counterparts with low-stress employees.

Our understanding of biology, psychology, and the workplace calls for companies to make fostering social connections a strategic priority. A more connected workforce is more likely to enjoy greater fulfillment, productivity, and engagement while being more protected against illness, disability, and burnout.

FORGING CONNECTIONS AT WORK

My experience has been that people bring the most to their work when they feel connected to the mission and the people around them. While I was at the Surgeon General's Office, our staff grew quickly as we sought to build a team that could address an array of pressing public health issues. Although team members got along well, it soon became clear that we didn't fully recognize the rich life experience that each person brought to the team. We had a decorated Army nurse, a woman who had spent years providing medical care to prison inmates, an accomplished pianist and preacher, an Olympic-level runner, and several team members who had struggled with addiction in their family. Even though we were operating with the formality and hierarchy of a uniformed service, my team was hungry to know more about each other.

To bring us closer, we developed "Inside Scoop," an exercise in which team members were asked to share something about themselves through pictures for five minutes during weekly staff meetings. Presenting was an opportunity for each of us to share more of who we were; listening was an opportunity to recognize our colleagues in the way they wished to be seen.



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The impact was immediate. These sessions quickly became many people's favorite time of the week, and they were more enthusiastic about participating at staff meetings. People felt more valued by the team after seeing their colleagues' genuine reactions to their stories. Team members who had traditionally been quiet during discussions began speaking up. Many began taking on tasks outside their traditional roles. They appeared less stressed at work. And most of them told me how much more connected they felt to their colleagues and the mission they served.

I remember one Inside Scoop from a team member who had proudly served in the U.S. Marine Corps. I expected him to talk about his experiences in the military. Instead, he spoke about the complex relationship he had had with his father and how he could see his father's spirit living on in the musical talent of his grandchildren. He described his mother as his hero and shared how remembering her in the face of a challenge would transform his doubts into strength. As he spoke, his eyes glistened. I felt a deep connection to him in that moment and was inspired by his honesty and compelled to reflect on my own relationships. Even though we were close before, my relationship with him became even stronger after that day.

I share what my office did not as the antidote to loneliness but as proof that small steps can make a difference. And because small actions like this one are vital to improving our health and the health of our economy.

CREATING CONNECTION

We know that if we are to prioritize our health and the health of our companies, the workplace is one of the most important places to cultivate social connections. And while it may seem easy enough to organize a team-building event, grab a cup of coffee with a colleague, or chat with people around the water cooler about *Game of Thrones*, real connection requires creating an environment that embraces the unique identities and experiences of employees inside and outside the workplace. Here are five deliberate steps that can help build healthy and productive relationships:

Evaluate the current state of connections in your workplace. Strong social connections are not simply about the number of friends and family members one has; it's the quality of those connections that matters more. You can be surrounded by many people and have thousands of connections on LinkedIn or Facebook and still be lonely. Conversely, you can have just a handful of people with whom you interact and feel very connected. To assess the quality of the relationships at your organization, here are some questions to consider: Do employees feel that their colleagues genuinely value and care for them? Do they believe their institution has a culture that supports giving and receiving kindness? Would they characterize their relationships with colleagues as being driven more by love or by fear?

Build understanding of high-quality relationships. Strong social connections are characterized by meaningful shared experiences and mutually beneficial two-way relationships, where both individuals give and receive. High-quality relationships must be grounded in love and informed by kindness, compassion, and generosity. There is a tendency to look at such positive emotions as “soft” and even as a liability that distorts judgment and impairs tough decision making. But research increasingly shows that positive emotions enhance performance and resilience. Be clear with employees and colleagues about the types of relationships you want to see at work and what types of actions, like generosity, foster those relationships.

Make strengthening social connections a strategic priority in your organization. Designing and modeling a culture that supports connection is more important than any single program. It will require buy-in and engagement from all levels of the organization, particularly leadership. Having senior members of an organization invest in building strong connections with other team members can set a

powerful example, especially when leaders are willing to demonstrate that vulnerability can be a source of strength, not weakness. Ask yourself if the current culture and policies in your institution support the development of trusted relationships.

Encourage coworkers to reach out and help others – and accept help when it is offered. Although it may seem counterintuitive to assist others when you are feeling lonely, extending help to others and allowing yourself to receive help builds a connection that is mutually affirming. Late one night during my residency training, I was managing a busy intensive care unit when one of my colleagues stopped and offered to help with a sudden influx of critically ill patients. Because of his generosity, we were able to rapidly place specialized catheters in patients with bloodstream infections and get them life-saving antibiotics quickly. We worked together for only an hour that night, but the connection we built lasted years. Giving and receiving help freely is one of the most tangible ways we experience our connections with each other.

Create opportunities to learn about your colleagues' personal lives. The likelihood that authentic social connections will develop is greater when people feel understood and appreciated as individuals with full lives – as mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, individuals with passions outside of work, concerned citizens and community members. Everyone in an organization has the power to create spaces for sharing, whether it is in a formal gathering or an informal conversation over lunch.

HEALING ONE ANOTHER

When I think of loneliness, I think about the first day of my internal medicine residency program. A faculty member advised us to call the people we love and tell them that they wouldn't be hearing from us much over the next year. As medical students, we'd heard about the trials of residency training: the unforgiving hours, the grueling intensity, and the crushing isolation. That morning, the idea of stepping away from our most trusted social relationships felt unnerving.

Despite my initial fears about loneliness, those three years ended up being the best of my life. The hours and intensity were just as billed, if not even more so. As predicted, it was very difficult to stay in touch with friends. But in time I developed rich and fulfilling relationships with my colleagues in the hospital.

Coming to work came to feel like spending time with friends. There were plenty of difficult moments when our emotional, intellectual, and physical reserves were tested – navigating a difficult end-of-life conversation, trying to find an elusive source of infection in a critically ill patient, or simply fighting back our own exhaustion – but my bonds with my colleagues softened the blows and saved me from

plenty of others. Those bonds enabled me to do more, give more, appreciate more, and be a better doctor to thousands of patients. Today, years later, I wonder if these relationships provided deeper healing: if they made me not just a better doctor but a better colleague and leader, too.

The world is suffering from an epidemic of loneliness. If we cannot rebuild strong, authentic social connections, we will continue to splinter apart – in the workplace and in society. Instead of coming together to take on the great challenges before us, we will retreat to our corners, angry, sick, and alone. We must take action now to build the connections that are the foundation of strong companies and strong communities – and that ensure greater health and well-being for all of us. | **THE BIG IDEA**

