

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Building Healthy Teams

How does a team develop love for each member? Where does camaraderie find its roots? Why does a bond develop among some teams but not in others? Studies of effective teams offer three major clues on what makes a team healthy.

Healthy teams have a great leader.

Along with the rising interest in team ministry in the last decade, a number of misunderstandings have accumulated. One of the main misunderstandings is that teams function best without a clear

leader. While this may at times appear to be the case, observation of teams throughout history has shown it rarely, perhaps never, is true. One of the paradoxes of teams is that healthy teams have great leaders. Warren Bennis and Patricia Biederman comment on this paradox when they write,

“All great groups have extraordinary leaders. It's a paradox, really, because great groups tend to be collegial and nonhierarchical, peopled by singularly competent individuals who often have an anti-authoritarian streak. Nonetheless, virtually every great group has a strong and visionary head.”

Reaction against a single team leader often focuses on the fear of having a dictatorial leader. Leadership, of course, is not necessarily dictatorial. What all leaders have in common is that others recognize the value of their contribution and choose to follow them. While teams do, of course, have members who take the lead from time to time in handling different leadership functions, one person is always viewed as the leader; one is always perceived as the place where the “buck stops.”

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Healthy Team Relationships

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Healthy teams are relationally small.

It is generally accepted that the best teams are composed of twelve or fewer people, with a team of six or seven being the best. Auren Uris, a highly respected researcher and writer in the fields of human resource and management supports the importance of small teams. He writes that, “There is growing evidence that the most creative *problem-solving* or *decision-making* will occur in small, odd-numbered groups (5, 7, 9).” He advises, “If you want originality and creative contributions, . . . keep the group small. Five people is the number many researchers suggest for optimum efficiency, freedom of exchange and cooperation.”

There are always exceptions, of course, but from a relational perspective, it appears healthy teams normally comprise fewer than twelve members.

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Healthy teams build units of three.

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Another aspect important to healthy team size is related to the unit of three. Kenneth R. Mitchell, writing in *Multiple Staff Ministries*, declares, "In any human interactional system, the basic unit, or building block, is the triangle." Examples of groups of three are the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and a family: father, mother, and child. According to Mitchell, two-person teams are inherently unstable and seek to find a third element to make a triangle. Most couples will seek to have at least one child, and two staff pastors will search for a third staff member to round out the team.

When a team grows larger than seven individuals, it becomes much more difficult to maintain the collegial spirit, intimate acquaintance, and common vision necessary to maintain team health. To keep larger teams healthy, it is wise to organize them by triangles. A good example is found in the Twelve Disciples of Jesus. By closely examining the relational structure of the disciples, a pattern of subset groups appears. In every listing of the twelve disciples (or the eleven as in Acts 1:12-13), the various names appear in a common pattern. While some of the disciples names are moved around depending on which passage of scripture the list is found in, three names remain constant in every listing of the disciples given: Simon is always first, Philip is always fifth, and James son of Alphaeus is always ninth. Apparently the twelve disciples were organized into three subteams. Each subteam had a leader (Simon, Philip, and James) and three team members (a triangle).

This reflects directly on the much asked question, "How many people can one person supervise?" Based on the above discussion, it is probably best if no more than six people report to any single individual (a team of seven). Of course, each person who reports can also have another six people reporting to them (another team of seven) and on-and-on. Some leaders are able to oversee larger teams. The variables are related to factors such as . . .

> the experience of the team members: experienced staff members need less supervision while inexperienced members need more.

> the complexity of ministry: complex ministries require more oversight while less complex ones require less oversight.

> the personal skills of the leader: skillful leaders can manage more people while less skillful leaders can manage fewer people.

> the style of leadership: by coaching in groups one can oversee more people while coaching one-on-one the leader can oversee fewer people.

> the confidences of the leader: secure leaders delegate more while insecure leaders do more work themselves.

Healthy teams are nurtured.

Doran McCarty writes in *Working with People* that "a leader does not announce that a collection of people is a team." Building a healthy team happens over time as the members focus on bonding, communicating, and supporting each other. "A team is not just any group working together. Committees, councils, and task forces are not necessarily teams. Groups do not become teams simply because someone labels them as a team."

According to McCarty a group of people becomes a team by wanting to be a team and working together. A team forms over time through shared goals and mutuality as team members turn to each other for information, help, and emotional support. You know a team has formed when what the team achieves corporately becomes more important than the personal agenda of each member.



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