

Developmental Stages of a Fellowship

By
Dan Gallagher

Through the years I've experienced the joy, and at times the pain, of both hosting and belonging to a small group. These groups have been related to my work, personal, and religious life. At times I've been confused by what seems like the continually changing nature of the small group, asking myself, "Why can't things just stay the same?"

Well the simple fact is that, just like people, small groups go through phases of development or stages of growing up. The following are the various stages that I've adapted from the information presented by Neal McBride in his book, *How To Lead Small Groups*. Having a clearer understanding of the developmental stages will help us enjoy and embrace these changes. Understanding this process has helped me through the growth process in the various fellowships I've been involved with.

Phase One: Birth and Infancy (Forming)

The birth and infancy phase is characterized by tentatively initiating behaviors in the group. The group's members come to the first meetings with hesitancy. The first phase is generally short, and provides certain information and processes that are vital to the group's formation.

Phase Two: Childhood (Norming)

Children are notorious for testing those around them. This same type of testing takes place during the childhood phase of group development. The members learn what is acceptable, how and how not to behave, what is and what isn't permissible, what is and what isn't expected of group members. This process of learning the boundaries is called *norming*. Every group has norms, spoken or unspoken.

Phase Three: Teenage (Conforming)

Every teenager goes through a time of questioning and conforming. The conforming phase is a time of transition. Questioning and adjustment are the two major events in this phase. It's natural to question. Voicing agreement or disagreement with relationships and activities comes naturally, and so may happen. Don't be surprised if everything seems to be going well and then suddenly one or two members begin to question and/or complain about various aspects of the group. In most cases, this is a healthy step in the group's development.

Major or minor adjustments may be necessary. A change in schedule, altering the format, or time spent working through relational issues are examples of potential realignments.

Phase Four: Maturing (Performing)

The fourth phase of the group development portrays a mature and functioning group. Now the group is really clicking. Ideally, maintaining your group's life has become a shared process. Everyone in the group is taking responsibility. Nevertheless, conscious and deliberate steps must be taken to monitor the dynamics and procedural details and doing so ensures continuing vitality.

Be alert for "mid-life crisis." Boredom with the routine, unresolved conflicts, ambiguous norms, conflicting schedules, lack of variety, and so on, could all trigger this affliction. Evaluation and adjustment are important considerations.

Phase Five: Fruitful (Reproducing)

One of the purposes of the fellowship is to help its members in their growth toward spiritual maturity and the full expression of their gifts and callings. Reproduction is not always necessary for the continuation of the fellowship, although it does demonstrate a healthy and mature condition. Fruitfulness can be evidenced by the growth in the individual members, new members being added, and the need to plant other groups.

Healthy fellowships generally see themselves as wanting to grow to the point where they split into two viable fellowships. This requires that the fellowship have a vision that spitting is healthy and will keep growth happening. In order for this to be accomplished, there should be a continual preparation of the hearts of its members. A split actually results in two new fellowships, which begins the developmental process again at Phase One.

Phase Six: Old Age and Demise (Reforming)

Not all fellowships split or continue for an indefinite period of time. The "old age" phase can happen by design or default. A mature, successful group doesn't conclude in one last meeting. Actually, the process of coming to an end should take place during a number of meetings. Reflecting on and celebrating the struggles and successes experienced by the group during its lifetime is a vital element to this phase. Careful attention must be given to ending the group on a positive note and paving the way for the members' future involvement in new groups.

Gaining an understanding of the developmental stages of small groups has helped me tremendously. As I saw my fellowships going through its changes I would at times question my leadership ability or even the commitment of those in attendance. Now I embrace the changes, knowing that they are indicative of growth and a maturation of the group. Recently my wife and I moved to another part of the country, which resulted in us having to close our fellowship. Knowing we were in the closing phase (*Old Age and Demise*) enabled us to celebrate it as the natural culmination of a successful group. Allowing for the grieving that should accompany a loss helped everyone transition in a healthy way. It is our goal to build a healthy community and knowing the developmental stages of small groups will help us do this.