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Team Talk Can Strengthen Volunteer Ministry

Team talk can build a strong ministry team. Of course, some may not think of conversation as an important task, viewing it as getting in the way of work and slowing it down. On the contrary, conversation plays an important role in the life of a team, builds group durability, and sustains effort. Talking about the work helps to reinforce the reasons for doing what we are doing.

"Plug-in" Volunteering

Make no mistake: the American volunteer experience is decidedly task-oriented and talk-averse. Sociologist Paul Lichterman observes that a "task-oriented, short-term, plug-in style of volunteering . . . has become nearly synonymous with volunteering in the United States."[1] Churches, like many other nonprofit organizations, typically assign volunteers to fill short-term tasks, not long-term assignments. In some ways, the arrangement works out well. Volunteers appreciate that, with only a few hours commitment, they can experience the satisfaction of having "helped out." It's also easier for staff, who create slots for volunteers to fill and tasks to complete, which can then be quantified and reported to funders. Yet "plug-in" volunteering hampers dialogue.

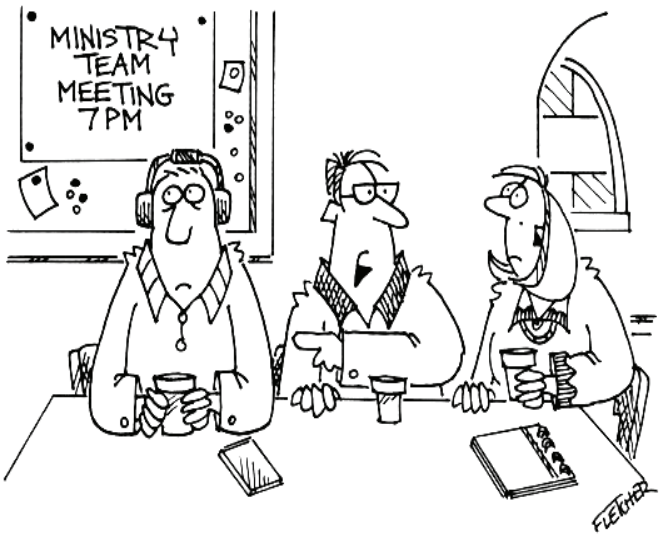
"Fun Evenings"

Working side by side on tasks does not necessarily build a team. Lichterman's research bears this out. The researcher volunteered for Fun Evenings, a project offering a drug-free, violence-free evening for disadvantaged youth, anticipating many opportunities for conversation. After all, the event had been billed as a "fun evening" at the Downtown Community Center, and included ping pong, dancing, and youth leadership training for the mostly Black, Latino, and Laotian teenagers, as well as a few white teenagers. The volunteers, all white and a generation or two older, would provide supervision.

From the outset, Lichterman found the situation confusing for himself as a volunteer. What exactly was he supposed to be doing? No one else seemed to know either. Polly, the coordinator, instructed them to monitor the youth and make sure no drugs got in. They were also told that any youth who leave should not be allowed back in, though he observed that the volunteers were lax with this requirement. Notably lacking was any process for building the team itself. Volunteers exchanged pleasantries and nothing more, failing to go deeper into conversation that might have strengthened their bond as friends. It even occurred to Lichterman that he did not especially care how he came across to others, knowing that he would not see these people again. An opportunity had been missed. Volunteers had been "plugged into" their tasks but not each other. Volunteers had "helped out" but not formed a team. More and deeper talk would have built a stronger team.[2]

Four Ways to Build Team Talk

Team dialogue can be strengthened in four ways. First, seek to move the team from shallow conversation to a deeper dialogue that airs genuine feelings and brings differences to the surface. Most small groups have plenty of



"I TEND TO BE A TALKER... JUST ASK DOUG."

conversation, yet plentiful talk without real communication can signal trouble. Practicing honesty and expecting it from others can strengthen the team and bring to the surface real issues that may need to be dealt with.

One technique for practicing honest conversation is called the EIAG (pronounced eye-ag) process. EIAG is an acronym that stands for Experience, Identify, Analyze, and Generalize.

- *Experience*. The process allows group members to understand one moment in the flow of events taking place in the group and how it affected every group member.
- *Identify*. First, identify when someone says or does something that could have a big impact on other members, positively or negatively, asking that person, "Would you be willing to explore the effect this had on the others?" If so, ask that person to withhold comments until everyone has finished.
- *Analyze*. Then analyze what happened by asking everyone present to talk about their own reactions. For example, "When [name] said (or did) this, I felt (thought, observed) or I did (or said) this." Or, "When it happened, I assumed this, which led me to react the way I did." After this, you can ask the person whose action you are analyzing, "What was your intention?"
- *Generalize*. Finally, the group can take a moment to generalize or think more broadly about how to act in other situations. Ask the person, "What have you learned?" and ask others the same question. This can deepen the trust required to form a genuine team.[3]

Second, strive for informal, relaxed meetings. The Fun Evenings volunteers never held meetings, but simply showed up for their assigned time slots. Regular meetings empower volunteers to make decisions for themselves, which builds teamwork. However, try to avoid "business-like" meetings that can be deadening. For instance, holding every meeting in "the boardroom" (the designated room where meetings are to take place), can be like always eating in the formal dining room. Look for an informal setting, perhaps somewhere offsite, and share a meal whenever possible to warm up the conversation.

Third, find ways to equalize the conversation so that the same people do not always dominate the conversation. Letting the big talkers have more airtime can be a conversation killer. Granted, some persons are more temperamentally suited to talking and others to listening. Yet the team nearly always gains more from sharing its wisdom than from listening to long-winded monologues. Ask the group to police itself. "If you tend to be a talker, pay attention to how much you talk, and try to talk less. If you tend to be a listener, try to talk more." Or if someone has been quiet, ask, "We have not heard from you yet. What do you think?"[4]

Fourth, draft a team covenant: a written or verbal agreement that describes and defines members' relationship as a team. Lack of trust is a key source of trouble in failing teams. Unless members feel safe and secure with the group, they will not contribute to their full potential. Some groups allow sarcasm to predominate, which stifles those who have sincere contributions to make. Or the problem may be more general, such as not knowing what sort of behavior to expect from other team members. A team covenant can correct this situation. George Cladis describes the covenant he developed with his church staff in Darien, Connecticut. It included these promises: (1) intentionally encourage and bless one another; (2) disagree openly, avoiding triangulation and speaking unkindly of others; and (3) like the potter and the clay, be willing to be molded and changed.[5]

Changed by Others' Testimony

Talking while we work not only sustains the team, but helps its members grow in faith. Ann Morisy, who works with British churches seeking to expand their outreach, sees dialogue as central to the church's work in the community. She writes, "The essence of dialogue is that each person who is party to the communication is open to the possibility of being changed by the testimony of the other."[6] Talk does more work than we give it credit for.

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1. Paul Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 66.

2. Ibid., 88–89.

3. Jackie Bahn-Henkelman, "Reflection: The Role of the EIAG," *Emotional Intelligence and Human Relations Skills Workshop Student Participant Guide*, EQ-HR: The Center for Emotional Intelligence and Human Relations Skills, 25–27, www.eqhr.org.

4. Marlene Wilson, *Creating a Volunteer-Friendly Church Culture* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004), 47–53.

5. George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999),160–61.

6. Ann Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan: Community Ministry and Mission* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 65.