Leadership Network
Ideas to Implementation to Impact

Creating a Culture Where Leadership Development is the Norm

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Pastor Michael Fletcher identified a serious problem at Manna Church (Fayetteville, NC) (www.mannachurch.org): the lack of leadership development was continually holding the church back. He decided not just to address it, but to emphasize it to the point that leadership development became the norm.

“I wish there was some deep theological reason or revelation from God that caused us to go this way,” Michael says. “We did it to survive.”

Senior Pastor Michael Fletcher of Manna Church pinpoints what fueled the decision to make leadership development the norm, watch this short video http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImfxdCukHKE.

Fast forward to today: leadership development happens at every level of the church, and that’s good given the high transiency of his community. “Today we had to grow by 1,000 people a year just to stay even,” says Michael, who stepped into senior leadership at Manna in his 20s and across 29 years has led Manna’s growth from 350 weekly attenders to more than 5,500. That’s because Manna is located in Fayetteville, North Carolina—home of the U.S. Army’s Fort Bragg, where military leaders are trained and are deployed by the thousands every year. Being so close to Fort Bragg Army base has a large impact on Manna Church because of so many soldiers transferring in and out.

“Unfortunately, we don’t get to choose who the Army sends away. We lose leaders constantly.”

Laying the Foundation

To introduce leadership development, Michael says Manna had to shift its culture from a “spiritual hospital that attracted bunches of broken people” to a place that also attracted, identified and trained people with leadership potential.
“Here we were, in the middle of some of the world’s best leaders in the military,” says Michael. “We felt convicted by God that we needed to shift our foundation and emphasis if we were going to attract the kind of people we could build into ministry leaders.”

The first step actually was a theological-philosophical one in which Michael and a few leaders had to wrestle with Jesus’ promise to “build His church.”

“I was so busy trying to build my church that I skipped over that part,” Michael says. “In Scripture God tells us we needed to build people, and He will build the church.”

Leaders vs. Doers

With that biblical underpinning, Michael made two strategic moves to begin shaping a leadership development culture: recruit leaders vs. doers, and build a simple “Growth Track” pipeline that systematically can move anyone from recruit to ministry leader.

“I know this flies in the face of what’s being done today in engaging a lot of people and using a lot of volunteers to get things done,” Michael says. “But we don’t even use the word volunteer to refer to ministry leaders.

“We don’t recruit volunteers; we would rather have a leader.” Those lay leaders, in turn, recruit other leaders as well as volunteers.

Michael explains that “doers” respond to need-based recruiting pitches (“We need X number of workers in the nursery”), while leaders are motivated by vision. Recruit a doer, and the job may get done. But the process stops there, and more recruiting will be required.

“If you recruit doers, they won’t bring in leaders and you won’t have any leaders,” Michael says. “But if you bring a leader into the mix, they’re going to bring other leaders. Leaders follow leaders, and doers follow leaders. If you recruit leaders into the ministry, you never run out of leaders or doers.”

Why “Growth Track” Over “Leadership Development”

With potential leaders clearly the priority, Michael says it was vital to build a pipeline that anyone identified as a leader can get in, and anyone can explain after hearing it described even a couple of times.

“If you’re around here two weeks and can’t tell us about our leadership pipeline, it’s too complicated,” Michael says. “We have to fight to keep it as simple as it is.

He stands his ground when challenged. “I’ve told people who have great ideas to complicate our pipeline, ‘You would be better off trying to kiss my wife.’ ”

Manna’s three-step “Growth Track” is the heart of the church’s extensive small group offerings. “We don’t call it a leadership development system, because 90% of people don’t see themselves as leaders and wouldn’t join it,” Michaels says. “But everybody wants to grow.”

FirstStep is a four-week small group for new Christians, where they learn “healthy habits” in their new relationship with Jesus.

NextStep is a four-week small group that focuses on Manna’s mission: Who are we? Why are we? Where are we going? What is your part? LeaderStep is a 10-week small group that moves potential leaders into the pipeline for identifying leadership gifts and deploying them into ministry.

“At the end of the day, churches will be reduced to their people and their systems,” says Michael. “You have to do more than just talk about developing leaders.”
Result: Leaders in Abundance

Michael may be one of the few pastors in the world who can make this statement: “We have an unending supply of leaders,” he says without flinching. “We have more leaders than we have places to put them.”

The Growth Track is working. Three Lead Team members at Manna—and Michael himself—got their start as janitors at the church. Manna has raised leaders from within the church to plant 71 churches worldwide. Nearly 95% of the church’s staff was “raised from inside the house”—many of them like Randy Thornton.

“We’ve taken a lot of guys like Randy Thornton, who others said would never make it,” Michael says. “Randy always had a heart for ministry, but people say he could not preach or organize himself out of a paper bag.”

Randy Thornton, founder and Senior Pastor of Grace Church in Southern Pines (www.gracechurchsp.org/southern-pines-nc) was on the pastoral staff and served as an elder at the Manna Church before being asked to plant Grace Church in Southern Pines, NC.

Randy went through the Growth Track, became a small-group leader and eventually a part-time staff member. He planted a Grace Church in Southern Pines, NC which is about an hour away from Manna that runs 1,200 people in attendance. “We have lots of stories like that,” Michael says.

Michael’s advice: To build a culture where leadership development is the norm, get started and don’t be afraid to start small. Michael began Manna’s leadership development track with a small group of people on Saturday mornings, then shifted to a weekly small group at 6 a.m. Sunday morning.

“Do not despise the day of small beginnings,” he explains. “No matter how big or small your church is, it begins by pouring yourself into leaders, and they will pour themselves into other leaders.

“If you don’t have a systematized way to develop leaders—some kind of organic pipeline—you won’t develop leaders long-term and you will always be in need of more leaders.”

About the Author

Warren Bird, Ph.D., research director at Leadership Network, is a former pastor and seminary professor, and is author or co-author of 24 books for ministry leaders, the most recent one with Jim Tomberlin: Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work. Some of Warren’s recent online reports include “The Heartbeat of Rising Influence Churches,” “Pastors Who Are Shaping the Future” and “A New Decade of Megachurches.” Follow him on Twitter @warrenbird or contact him at Warren.Bird@leadnet.org.