



The vital edges

3: TEAM BUILDING

Ministry will be as strong or as weak
as the team we work within

It is really important to take the time you need to build a strong team. And it does take time. We can cave in to the pressure of running things with a 'shoe string' team, especially if a particular ministry has been running for a long time or parents want a certain program to happen.

When I took on the role of children's pastor at a particular church there was a *Kids Klub* operating. Just three leaders were running the program, with about 50 children attending. Prior to starting in my new position at the church, I went to visit so I could observe how it was run. I was shocked at the program's lack of quality – all because there was such a limited team. The three who were there were doing their best, but I could see that the amount of organization required to deal with such large numbers of children was slowly killing three good leaders. The entire program had the potential to be 'taken over' by the children. Sure, it was a lot of fun, but was that what it was all about?

Two months before I started, the parents got wind of the fact that a new children's pastor was coming and that *Kids Klub* may be closed down. I started to get pressure from the parents about what I was

planning to do. A band of parents emailed me with a proposal that involved them running it for the next two months until I got there to take it over so that it could remain open. The pressure was on.

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I am all for outreach, but not at the expense of poor leadership and overwhelmed teams. This was one of those cases where it would be all too easy to fall into the trap of reacting out of need. As Jesus said, the need will always be there (see Matthew 26:11). I gently wrote back explaining the importance of strong teams and healthy programming and that until I could start at the church and begin to see what teams of people I had to work with in the ministry, it was good timing for *Kid's Klub* to have a break. I also added that

when I arrived, if they wanted to talk to me about being involved in the ministry I would be happy to talk to them. It wasn't the popular decision, but it was the right one. *Kids Klub* never started up again, and none of those parents ever joined the ministry team. It is also important to note that the three leaders running the club were burnt out and had a long break when I started there in ministry. There is much to learn from this example.

As team leader and builder, it is important to:

- Never run a program/ministry without a solid team, no matter how 'good' the ministry is.
- Be careful not to burn out good leaders by asking them to take on too much. It is your job to protect and care for them.
- Never give in to parent pressure if you feel it is the wrong direction for the ministry. Even though we are there to serve the families, it is not to be at the expense of quality ministry.
- Do not fill places with people who are doing it out of a sense of duty or for the wrong reasons.

- Pray about any new move in the ministry – for God's timing and provision. He will provide for the needs if it is the right direction to go.
- If someone approaches you to start a new ministry, ask questions about their reasons for wanting to see this happen.

BUILDING STRONG TEAMS

How do we build strong teams? Effective ministries have a recruiting strategy that includes clear job descriptions. They only accept people who feel they are called to the ministry, and they provide training and support. Ministries that have done this with respect to team building have found recruiting successful.

Effective ministries develop great team leadership. This is true of any ministry; it is just a new concept to many children's ministers.

Training leaders professionally and regularly is also a key to effective teams.

Below, I have outlined some strategies that I have found helpful in recruiting and maintaining the teams that I have led. While many of the examples I am giving are based in the local church, please note that they are principles that can be used right across any ministry organization, no matter what it looks like or how it is structured.

CLEAR VISION

People want to be a part of something that they can see is written down and verbalized very clearly. They want to be a part of a team that has a clear direction and has goals that can be evaluated and celebrated when they have been reached. This way it is very easy for people to see that they are a part of a team that is going somewhere and that is serious about its purpose. This builds a sense of 'team'.

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"Aim at today and you will get caught up in the daily and miss the mission. Aim at tomorrow and you will hit the mark of God's high calling."⁴⁸

If I were to give two people water guns and ask them to take aim, you can bet you would know where they would aim. It would either be at me or at each other. If I took people to an archery range and gave them an arrow and bow and said, "Just shoot!" we could be in big trouble. We don't do that, do we? We tend to give people a target to aim at if we are going to arm them with a weapon.

So often we put people in positions of leadership – we even arm them with a curriculum and/or resources – and then say "Just shoot!" We then wonder why people get easily distracted, why people don't last long in a position, and why people tend to begin blaming each other. Just as two people armed with water pistols end up shooting at each other, workers who don't really know what they are doing likewise end up blaming each other when things go wrong.

An aim is a simple thing. Mission and vision have been talked about extensively over the past ten years in the Christian world, yet I am amazed at how many ministries are yet to have an aim or vision. If they do, the workers often have no idea what it is.

THE BODY CONCEPT

Corinthians 12:12 clearly states that we are all given gifts and a place to serve in the body. One of the major problems in children's ministry is that we are expected to be good at everything. All this does is make children's ministry a place where people don't want to serve because the expectation is so high.

I know the things that I can't do well, and if I am forced to do them, it will either force me to quit or it will be a mess and I will feel like a failure. If I am required to organize or administrate we are all in trouble. We inevitably end up meeting at the wrong time, on the wrong date, in a place that doesn't exist or isn't booked! My team,

the children and their parents all applauded when I finally got an administrative assistant to help out in the ministry at one church where I was working. Now they would finally know when meetings were really on, and where they would be. We could finally know when kids attended, when they were away, and when their birthdays were.

In any given ministry there is a range of gifts required. The body concept recognizes that we all need each other's different gifts. There are some people that remember birthdays and some people who don't, there are some people who can cook and some who can't, and there are some people who are visionary and some who are great with details. We need them all. It was a great relief for me when I realized that God does not ask us to be able to do everything brilliantly. It has also been a great relief to others that I am not asking them to join the team and be able to do everything brilliantly.

There's a wonderful children's story I love to read to my kids called *Edward the Emu*. It is about an emu in a zoo that listens to what people are saying as they walk past his cage. When he hears someone say they like a particular animal best, he slips into their cage and tries to act like that animal so he can be noticed. He tries to be a snake, a tiger, a seal and some other animals. He tries so hard to be like everyone else. Eventually he hears someone say that it is the emu that they like to see. He can't believe that all the time he has been trying to be someone else, there have been people coming to the zoo especially to see him. That night he hops back into his cage to find to his surprise that another emu has taken his place. As Edwina the Emu turns around to look at him, she says with a shy little smile, "You are by far the best thing that I have seen since I've come to this zoo."⁴⁹ Edward is finally happy to be himself. There is nothing more satisfying than finding just the right place in the family of God, where you can fit and serve just the way God made you.

The body concept means that I ask people to work *only* within the area of ministry for which they are gifted. In this way, someone can come and be a part of the *Caring Team* and know that they will never

be expected to set up a craft, to sing a song up front, to tell a story or work with a puppet. They come to care for a small group of kids, to get to know them and to play with them. This is such a great way to get many different people involved who would otherwise never work with kids. People say to me, "I can play with a kid, but what's the point? That's not very helpful." Then I am able to show them that one of our core values is relationships. It is the key to the way we do discipleship. What you do by playing and caring for five children is imperative to how we achieve our goals for this ministry.

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People can choose to be in the *Creative Edge Team*, the *Caring Team*, the *Arts Team*, the *Active Team*, the *Teaching Team*, or the *Technical Team*. I have called this the 'CCAATT System' to make it easy for everyone to remember. Using this system ensures people work within their teams and feel a strong sense of identity within them. All have different but important purposes, but people only have to work in the areas for which they are gifted. This builds a team in an important

way. People feel empowered in the areas they feel comfortable in, and the children experience a depth of leadership and a variety of people types involved with them on a weekly basis.

JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Each person needs to be given a set job, and the expectations of that job are to be clearly spelled out for them. This ensures they know exactly who they are responsible to and who they are responsible for. They need to know what is required of them so they are aware of the number of hours expected and the spiritual gifts necessary to undertake the role.

At the beginning of each year, I would often put the job descriptions out for all to see at a meeting. Potential leaders were able to read them and decide what position they would like to take up for the year.

Once they nominated a position, we would talk about it and 'sign off' on this job together. This way there were no surprises; they knew what they were signing up for and knew what was expected of them.

LIMITED SERVICE

I believe that many people don't want to serve in children's ministry because they are scared they will get stuck there and will never escape again. I ask people for a year's commitment. This is because the ministry is largely run through relationships. I believe this cannot be done successfully in less than a year.

At the end of the year, at a break up party, I literally 'fire' everyone. That way they don't feel obliged in any way to return or do the same job. I make a joke of it and enjoy firing them, but of course this is preceded with a whole lot of encouragement and celebrating of the good things that have happened throughout the year. I also make a statement that goes something like, "Thank you for all that you have done, and for the amazing ministry that has happened because of you being involved. I have loved working with you and would love to work with you again next year. But I officially fire you because I want you to know that there is no obligation or guilt trip if you want to have a break".

Everyone has six weeks' break and is invited to come along to a vision night at the beginning of the next year for a no obligation look at what is happening that year in children's ministry.

QUALITY TRAINING

This is something I believe we don't focus enough on when it comes to kids generally. In the workplace, you need different degrees of training to do a job. Even within the church, a volunteer wouldn't think of running a Bible study, lead worship or even try to make a good coffee in the café without some degree of training. Yet, often we have no difficulty putting adults and younger people into a situation with kids without any guidance at all.

Working with children is getting harder; many people will not consider volunteering in this ministry because of the fear of being thrown into

the deep end with a group of kids who will run rings around them. It is one of my pet peeves about parenting. We would never consider being a teacher or a doctor or a builder without some training, but the number of adults who will go into parenting without any knowledge of children is frightening. No wonder families today are struggling with how to stay together and how to bring up their children.

Training must be an essential part of the ministry. I know that it is hard to get people to take time out of their busy life to come to training. This is where you need to make it worthwhile. I have found that when I put effort into making the training exceptional, leaders come. Once they have found it a worthwhile use of their time, they will make it a priority to come again.

You might like to consider the following ways to make it worthwhile for your leaders to attend.

- Hold the training somewhere else to get away from the usual setting. It makes it exciting, and God is able to work in different ways when we are taken out of our comfort zone.
- Connect with other churches or training in the area. There is much to be gained by being part of a bigger crowd and meeting with people doing a similar ministry in other churches.
- Bring in a guest speaker to train your people. I know that it will frustrate you to pay someone to say what you have been saying for the past six months, but trust me – your people will take it on board because someone else has said it. Suddenly, they will see it for the first time and they will own it! That's when change can occur.
- Food is always a good way to attract people – good food and good fellowship.
- A cost needs to be involved. People often feel that if something is for free, it is not worth attending. They might feel if they don't turn up they won't miss anything. Being required to pay for it, however, makes them more committed; they come with an expectation to gain something.

- Make it a priority to get away with your KEY leaders once a year. Take them somewhere special, to a great conference out of town, for example. There is so much to be gained by spending time and money on these people. Take them out of their comfort zone and see what God will do.

INVEST TIME IN PEOPLE

This one is a challenge for me, but I have learnt the hard way that people need to be treated like people and not merely as job-fillers. I am very task driven, and while that might achieve a lot over time, one soon learns that people will not stay working with you if they don't feel cared for.

I remember asking everyone in the middle of a meeting, "What would help you work better as a team?" Their response amazed me. They said that they would like to make some time to socialize together and get to know each other better. Well, in my mind, I was thinking, "I can't even get you to these meetings half the time, and now you want to make more meeting times?"

I went along with the plan because that is what they wanted, and by the third social event I began to realize that this was actually making a difference to the work environment and the way they were working together when they ministered together on a Sunday. Running a ministry for kids is often time consuming, and when you are in the middle of it you very rarely get to ask the people you are working with, "How are you going?" I began to make a point of getting to know my team on a personal level that did not involve ministry. We started to care for each other and become friends.

This is not always easy. You may not become the best of friends with all of the team, but you start to appreciate them for different things. I had been aware of the saying, "The family that plays together stays together", but I had never applied it to the work situation. And let's face it, ministry should be more than a work situation.

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not for that day. I began taking my 'core' team (there were four of them at a time) on 'out of the box' experiences. (I learnt this from Craig Jutlia, Children's Minister at Saddleback Church.)

The rule was that we were not to talk about work or ministry, and we were to just have fun. They didn't know where they were going – it was a little mystery – and that was always intriguing for everyone. It was just plain fun and it began to cement our team; we began to work better together.

PROMOTE AND EMPOWER

It is really important to be always thinking of the future and how to see the best in everyone. We all want to grow and try new things. It is sad when you see someone doing the same thing for ten years; it is as if they are stuck.

Now, I must clarify the above. I mean doing the same thing the same way for ten years. I have been in ministry for over twenty years. I'm still working with kids and will always do so. But I have grown and changed in so many ways that I am not the same person I was twenty years ago.

Always challenge people to do something new, even if it is within the same job. Training and going to see other ministries in action can certainly assist with this, along with reading and research. My role as a leader includes finding ways that my team can grow and be stretched. Some will naturally thrive and grow more than others. That's okay, because we all have different purposes and gifts. The key for us is to make sure that people are growing where they need to. This means allowing people to fail, giving them opportunities to be in a safe place, and debriefing with them when things don't go as well as planned. Even when someone feels they will never do something again, the experience is never void of learning something. Often it

is only during the experience that we can truly learn new things. When is the last time you challenged someone on your team to do something new?

This might also mean that you need to be willing to give away something you love doing, which is especially hard when someone else does it better than you. You need to be secure enough to know that when you empower someone to do something new, you are actually fulfilling your role as a leader. I used to joke about doing myself out of a job, and over time I actually did in a number of areas.

I love to lead worship; it is hard for me to hand it over to someone else, but that is just me being selfish. I had an intern who had a gift in this, and after some time being with me, it was obvious that she needed to be empowered to fly. I allowed her to take over a whole service. She led the worship, did the teaching and ran the team. After a while I would sneak to the back of the room where she was ministering and watch as she led the kids brilliantly. How exciting to think that I had the maturity to let her have a go and not hold onto it myself. I missed leading at times while sitting up the back and watching her relate to the kids so well. But I knew that that was what was required of me as the leader of the team.

It is important to empower others in their gifts and enjoy watching when they begin to bloom. If you can't build your teams beyond your own ability then you have no business being a leader of leaders, and you will always struggle to keep good, strong people working with the children.

ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

I must confess, this is the last strategy I have listed, not because it is the most important (although it probably is), but rather because I completely forgot about it in the first draft of this book. I tell you this because often we think that people who write books must do it all.

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The vital edges

4: DISCIPLESHIP

The purpose of the ministry is to introduce children to Jesus; therefore, we need a deliberate process of growth for our kids

If we have come to the conclusion that Jesus is the corner piece and that the purpose of the puzzle is to not only introduce children to Jesus, but to see them grow more like Jesus, then discipleship has to be a vital aspect of the puzzle. It should be a core value that we spend much of our time and energy on.

I was standing in the line at the post office and there was a lady with a baby in front of me. The people in the line were admiring the baby and fussing over it. Then one lady said, "Isn't a shame that they grow up?" and everyone agreed! I didn't. I felt weird about that comment. I thought, "Why do we not want them to grow up?" I know we all like babies; we think they are cute, sweet, lovely to cuddle, controllable, small and easier to handle... I could go on. But it began to dawn on me that it is in our nature to want our kids to stay young, immature, totally dependant babies.

Yet so much of this thinking is a fantasy, not to mention unbiblical. Babies are not easier, they are different. Many times you are guessing what they need, they are constant and exhausting...Yes, they are beautiful - but not without their own challenges. The reason it is so

5. If you worked on the body concept, how could you break down the ministry into areas where more people work within areas where they utilised their gifts only?

6. Take some time to think of three simple ways that you could encourage your team in the next ten weeks.

1.

2.

3.

7. Plan a social event where people can relax and enjoy each others' company! (Remember the rule: no ministry talk)

8. Who can you think of in your team who has been in the same position for a long time? How can you empower them to stretch themselves and try something new?
