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Beating Burnout by Building Teams

by Lynne M. Baab

About two years ago I performed Beth and Steve's wedding ceremony. At that time they were brand new to our congregation. Over the months that followed I watched them get involved in a small group and then begin to serve as Sunday school teachers. Toward the end of their first year teaching Sunday school I had a few minutes to talk to them. "How are you doing?" I asked. "How's it going for you as Sunday school teachers?" "We love it!" one of them answered, and I'd have to use the word "radiant" to describe their demeanor as they talked about teaching Sunday school.

Some months later I went to visit Beth after the birth of the couple's first baby. "Are you getting help?" I asked. She told me that two couples had been bringing them lots of food, and I asked where she and Mark had met them. One couple was in their small group, and they knew the other couple, Mike and Sandy, from their Sunday school team.

Later I asked Dianne Ross, our children's ministries director, about the Sunday school team that Beth and Steve had served on. "I set up that team intentionally," Dianne told me. "Mike and Sandy are well connected here at church, have experience in teaching, and have a deep personal faith. I wanted them to be teamed up with a couple who were learning to teach Sunday school and who were newer to church and perhaps even newer to the Christian faith. Beth and Steve fit the role perfectly. I asked Mike and Sandy to take Beth and Steve under their wing, to invite them over for dinner and pray for them, that kind of thing. I added two single people to that team, and I watched them all connect and become friends."

Since I had the impression that on Sunday school teams the two couples and the singles took turns teaching, I asked Dianne how the two couples would get to know each other if they were always teaching on different Sundays.

"I have the whole team teach together the first two weeks," she said. "That way the kids can get to know all the teachers and the teachers can begin to get to know each other. Then, after they start teaching on alternate Sundays, they usually need to talk most weeks to tell the other team members what happened. I try to match up people on teams who I think will enjoy getting to know each other and might become friends. We have quarterly events for our Sunday school teachers. Often our teachers are glad to come to the training and appreciation events because they will get to see their teammates."

Dianne said Beth and Steve's team members became close friends. She described seeing them talk intimately with each other at teachers' functions and at the end-of-the-year party, and said she could see their tender care for each other.

Dianne also described one large Sunday school class for which she recruited a group of couples and singles in their twenties. The eight of them rotate teaching and have a growing friendship. For the nursery team she recruited mothers with very young children so they would have something in common as they served together and found their "place" in the church.

For Beth and Steve, teaching Sunday school became a place where they could serve God together and grow in friendship with another couple and the singles who were on the team. I could begin to see why they seemed so radiant as they described their experience in serving. Burnout was the furthest thing from their experience.

The Example of Alpha

A similar pattern has emerged among the members of my church who have participated in Alpha, an 11-week introduction to the Christian faith, complete with weekly dinners, videos, and small-group interactions. In my congregation, we are just finishing our third Alpha course in 18 months. This course is one of the most labor-intensive programs we have ever provided. I expected that it would require a lot of work and that the benefits would be worth it, and both of these expectations have been met. Participants have grown in faith and become connected to each other, and Alpha has proved to be a very good thing for us to do, just as I expected. However, I didn't expect that one of the sweetest blessings would be the deep relationships formed among the Alpha team members.

The Alpha team for each course consists of 10 to 12 people: the leader, the administrator, three small group leaders, and one or two helpers for each small group. Before each Alpha course starts, the team meets on two Saturday mornings for training. Those Saturday training times begin with a solid hour of sharing of personal concerns and prayer. The leader asks, "How are you feeling about being involved in this ministry? Are there things going on in your life that you want us to pray for?" and the group then prays for each other and for the many needs and concerns members have expressed about the upcoming Alpha course.

On each of the 11 nights that Alpha meets the team gathers 15 minutes before dinner to share concerns and pray for the evening. People have the opportunity to briefly mention their personal concerns: "I'm still job hunting." "My boss is still pushing me to work too many hours." "My mom's chemotherapy is going better than expected." The group then prays together.

Alpha originated at a church in England and has spread around the world, along with plenty of training opportunities for learning the accepted wisdom of what makes an Alpha course work. The Alpha trainers emphasize that the most important team meeting is the one that occurs at the end of each evening, when the team gathers for 15 to 30 minutes to debrief on how the evening went.

I served as a small group leader for our first Alpha course and I strongly resisted this idea of meeting together at the end of each evening. On Alpha evenings I often arrived at church at five o'clock to help set tables. We would gather as a team to pray at 5:45. Dinner was at six o'clock, followed by the video and small groups, which ended at 8:45. By that time I was more than ready to go home, but Alpha protocol insisted that we gather one more time as a team.

I'm now convinced that those late evening gatherings are one of the keys to the success of Alpha. In that debriefing time the team members share frustrations with each other: "In my group one person dominated the conversation." "Someone asked a really hard question and I didn't know how to answer." They also share joys: "A woman in my group said she read the Bible every day this week and she's starting to learn to pray." They discuss logistics for the next week: "The room was too cold tonight and people couldn't concentrate. Can we have the heat higher next time?"

Our Alpha leader told me that the debriefing process has an incredible bonding effect on the team. "I don't have to prod people to stay late and meet together," he said. "They are eager to hear what happened in the other groups." In order to gather to debrief, the team members have to detach themselves from their conversations with participants. Placing this priority on talking with team members demonstrates that the team matters, that the members are serving with a group of people who are engaged in this ministry and committed to each other. In addition, the debriefing helps the team members gain perspective when their small group has not gone very well that evening. In such a labor-intensive ministry, a discouraging evening can make a team member feel that it is just not worthwhile to work so hard, but listening to someone else talk about the fruit that God is bringing through this ministry helps the members regain perspective. There is a shared excitement that is infectious.

Why Teams?
A practical, functional argument can be made as to why team building works to prevent burnout and

to provide satisfaction in serving: When people perceive that they are working with others who are enjoying the sense of camaraderie, they are able to work longer, harder, and with greater joy. When I conducted interviews for my book on burnout among volunteers, *Beating Burnout in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2003), I heard again and again that people are happiest serving when they are relationally connected to the people around them. One rabbi called it "flipping pancakes while talking with people."

One woman I interviewed talked about the high level of burnout in many areas of ministry in her congregation, but described two ministries that never seem to lack for volunteers and where people seem to enjoy serving and don't experience burnout. Those two ministries stood out among all the others for one specific reason: The volunteers gathered to share personal needs and to pray together before launching into their evening's work.

In our increasingly fast-paced society, people are experiencing more isolation. Demographic studies show that more people are living alone. Even for people who live in families or with friends, our frantic pace makes it challenging to nurture caring relationships. The desire to "flip pancakes while talking with people" reflects a deep need for connection: to serve others while being in relationship.

The significance of building teams is rooted in who we are as people. This is the theological reason why teams work. We were created by God both for relationships and for meeting the needs in our world. Truly we are God's hands and feet in our world, called to show God's love in a world that desperately needs it. However, we are called to make God's love known as a community, not as isolated individuals. Sometimes the most significant way God's love is shown is through the way we love one another. As we serve we can't grow in love with our fellow servers unless we take time to get to know each other, to listen to each other, and to pray for each other.

Committees into Communities
In my interviews I heard over and over that boring committee meetings are a surefire road to burnout. I also heard time and again about the importance of transforming committees into communities, places where people can get to know each other and support each other personally, as well as tackle tasks together.

"We don't have time for personal sharing," committee members often object. "It takes us two hours just to get our business accomplished. How can we add in some sharing time?"

Committee business often takes a long time because people have a high need to be heard, so they talk at length about the issues at hand. Beginning committee meetings with a check-in time, where people can talk about personal needs and pray for each other, can help the business get accomplished much more quickly. This applies to church board meetings as well.

In one of our recent board meetings we had a discussion among the elders about their satisfaction level in serving. Some elders expressed contentment and joy in serving and others said they sometimes feel isolated and bewildered in their role. Some of our elders chair committees and some serve on teams with other elders. I noticed that all the elders who felt a bit uneasy in their roles are the chairs of committees, and that most of those who expressed contentment with their roles serve on teams with other elders. I concluded from this small sample that serving on teams with other elders helps the elders experience peer support in their roles as congregational leaders. I meet monthly with the administration team, which is composed of the elders for building and grounds, personnel, and stewardship. We spend about an hour and a half talking about administrative issues, then we share prayer requests and pray together. We pray for each other and for the administrative issues of the congregation.

Our personnel elder has a particularly heavy load. She chairs the personnel committee, which meets monthly, and she also meets monthly with the administration team and the whole board of elders.

Her term as elder ends in about a year, and she says she will enjoy being free of all the responsibility but will sorely miss the three groups of people who have supported her personally. She knows she will have to find a new support structure. Her comments tell me that we truly have been building teams and fostering community in our committees, on our board, and in our administration team meetings. I really liked hearing that she views her three monthly meetings as places where she gets support personally.

Forming Teams

Based on my interviews and my observations in my own congregation, I have a few suggestions for forming and nurturing teams:

- When you have the opportunity to influence who serves on a specific team, as much as possible choose people who have something in common and might grow close to each other.

- When you pick leaders of teams, make sure they are committed both to achieving the task at hand and to nurturing relationships among team members. Make sure they understand that the hard-driving CEO model simply is not appropriate in congregations. All team leaders need to provide opportunities for people to grow together, as well as the logistical help and support for team members to get their jobs done.

- In all gatherings related to achieving tasks, set up structures for expressing personal concerns, such as a sharing time at the beginning, middle, or end of a meeting. In large gatherings, break into groups of two, three, or four to share personal needs. Don't neglect the significance of debriefing times after a task is finished, asking, "How did it go for you? What can you share that might encourage the rest of us?"

- Pray together both for personal needs and for the ministry you are working on together. In large meetings, break into smaller groups for prayer. Praying out loud is great, but if there are people who aren't comfortable praying aloud, offer times of silent prayer as well, and provide instructions for silent prayer, such as asking each person to pray for the person to his or her left or asking ahead of time for volunteers to pray silently about specific issues related to the task you are trying to achieve.

Perhaps the most significant suggestion I can offer is to remember at all times the unique character of congregations. We are called to perform tasks and nurture relationships in community. We are not a business with its highest priority on achieving tasks. Every gathering in a congregation that is focused on a task should also include an opportunity to build and nurture relationships.

Team. Burnout is rarely an individual. phenomenon; ï¬xing and preventing it. requires leadership. You can help your. team thrive by implementing the. following advice. high on two components and low on one. Â Or could you build some positive, supportive relationships to counteract the ones. that drain you? Burnout is completely normalâ€"but that doesnâ€™t make it pleasant. Read on for tips on how to beat burnout and get unstuck from your situation! Â Read on for tips on how to beat burnout and get unstuck from your situation! Table of Contents. Watch My Free Beating Burnout Training. #1: Burnout Alters Your Brain. #2 Increase Your Neuroplasticity. #3: Team up with accountability partner. #4 Create rewards systems for yourself. #5: Nourish Your Brain. Â #3: Team up with accountability partner. Whether you are trying to excel at a project that may earn you a promotion at work or you want to become skilled at a pressure-free hobby like learning how to cook a particular type of food, opt to have an accountability partner (or multiple) who will help motivate you to succeed. 5 Ways To Beat Burnout and Increase Productivity. 252 Comments. Read More. Â That is why these pantries at office buildings, where you have a copier, a coffee machine, a small kitchenâ€¦ are so important: you have the opportunity to chat with a collegue a little about some nonsense or anything just to have contactâ€¦ Contact refreshes you.. and cheers you upâ€¦ So then you have confidence and energy to work on.. Our team was working long hours and teetering on the edge of burnout. Hereâ€™s how weâ€™ve managed to turn things around. Â The team was scared; work was already piling up, and if they took time off to recharge, the incoming work wouldnâ€™t stop, it would just be there when they got back, worse than ever. They were (rightly) scared that knowing this, they wouldnâ€™t be able to enjoy their time off. Another developer mentioned â€" and others agreed â€" that he felt guilty about leaving his workload behind for his teammates. Â He loves to help other entrepreneurs build startups by sharing his own experiences from the trenches. Read all of Alex's articles. We were unable to load Disqus.