

PRINCIPLE 1

forming community



The life and ministry of Jesus offers timeless examples of leadership skills. No one should think that because His ministry occurred over nineteen hundred years ago, it offers little or nothing substantive for twenty-first-century individuals. Indeed, a model of effective leadership is embedded within the Gospel stories. What we know about leadership only confirms Jesus' example as the world's greatest leader—no leader of any age or era has so impacted the world or effected change on such a global scale as Jesus has.

By the same token, no leader has ever created the impact upon His followers as did Jesus. One may cite other historical figures, alleging their impact upon their followers. Yet, while those historical figures may have had their monumental achievements, they have also shown evidence of power abuse when motivating their followers to do strange or less than honorable things. Jesus, however, created a leadership environment in which His followers embraced their leader's vision and embodied His character and essence.

When talking about Jesus as a leader, it is often challenging to discern where the divine Jesus bisects the human Jesus. Any discussion of His leadership style or techniques must anticipate the question of where those skills came from. Did Jesus lead the way He did because He is the Son of God? Or did the human Jesus apply what He learned in thirty years of observant experience from the synagogue, the marketplace, and the workbench in His father's—Joseph's—shop? In this treatment of Jesus' extraordinary leadership practices, we will look at those skills from our human perspective, identifying with Jesus as a fellow leader who had to coordinate His resources in order to address His vision.

► THE FIRST STAGE OF LEADERSHIP

Leaders are capable of developing a following. Without followers, one can hardly say he or she is a leader. It is in this light that we draw the first stage of leadership: **A leader must form a community.** As Jesus showed, the task of developing followers—forming community—should receive priority in the earliest stages of ministry:

As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, catching fish with a net. Jesus said to them, “Come with me, and I will teach you to catch men.” At once they left their nets and went with him. He went a little farther on and saw two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in their boat getting their nets ready. As soon as Jesus saw them, he called them; they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and went with Jesus (*Mark 1:16-20*).

Later Jesus went back to the same location where He found an additional member for His community. Scripture records what happened this way:

Jesus went back again to the shore of Lake Galilee. A crowd came to him, and he started teaching them. As he walked along, he saw a tax collector, Levi son of Alphaeus, sitting in his office. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Levi got up and followed him (*Mark 2:13-14*).

So far in the story, Jesus has put together a community of five individuals. But He doesn’t stop there:

Then Jesus went up a hill and called to himself the men he wanted. They came to him, and he chose twelve, whom he named apostles. “I have chosen you to be with me,” he told them. “I will also send you

out to preach, and you will have authority to drive out demons.” These are the twelve he chose: Simon (Jesus gave him the name Peter); James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee (Jesus gave them the name Boanerges, which means “Men of Thunder”); Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Patriot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus (*Mark 3:13-19*).

Jesus has now gathered around Him a community of twelve—the twelve that He chose to unite as His definition of a community of followers.

Consider this: Could Jesus have exercised His world-changing leadership ministry without calling this group of followers together? While it is possible that God could have circumvented the typical patterns of developing, training, equipping, and deploying a community of followers, He didn’t do it that way! Instead, He created a community. It is frequently said that it takes a village to raise a child. While few know exactly where this saying originated, the point is to note the communal nature of the parenting experience. The power of community becomes clear when we look at the level of impact that social communities have on their participants. Reflective of this is the community that Jesus formed: it was focused, energized, and united in commitment to the vision and mission of Jesus.

And it is here—among the twelve whom Jesus called—that we find the first *Christian* community. In this small community, Jesus began training and preparing these individuals to assume new roles and responsibilities. Indeed, it is doubtful these followers could have ever imagined what life was about hand them as the result of their becoming a part of the community of Jesus. And, as time would later

reveal, however, their participation in this community was absolutely essential to their survival. To understand this importance, we must begin by exploring *why*.

Why did Jesus begin His ministry by forming a community? (It could not possibly have had anything to do with any limitation of His part.) As we read in the Gospels, it becomes clear that two powerful dynamics are at work:

1. Jesus is doing the work the Father commissioned Him to perform. He is literally a man on a mission. He has a divine assignment and there is no negotiating His responsibilities. Delegation is out of the question; success is not debatable—the mission must be accomplished.

2. Jesus must develop a community of committed followers in order for the mission to be accomplished. Consequently, Jesus identifies, selects, and trains the individuals, thereby molding them into a team. Frequently, Jesus must acknowledge the powerful presence of individual personalities as their differences begin to appear. Relentlessly, however, Jesus continues to mold, shape, and form the stubborn clay of individualism into what eventually becomes a community of faith—His Church!

The remarkable outcome—the molding of individual personalities, tastes, preferences, opinions, etc.—would take time. There would be moments of great encouragement; yet there would also be moments when Jesus would wonder, *Will any of them ever get it?*

► EXAMINING STAGE ONE LEADERSHIP

Forming community is the critical first step in every leadership situation. If this step or stage is overlooked, one's

potential as a leader is seriously jeopardized. At a certain point, a distinction must be made between performing a task, completing an objective, or accomplishing a goal. In some situations, the task, objective, or goal may be effectively accomplished by the individual or team of persons to which the responsibility is assigned. Yet this isn't enough.

Leadership is about more than accomplishing a task, objective, or goal; it is about leveraging resources to accomplish more than the individual or the team can accomplish alone. Leadership is about motivation, inspiration, and action—concepts which are only achieved through forming community.

► IS COMMUNITY REALLY NEEDED?

Rising to the position as the leader of a group of people is not without its challenges. There are often situations in which merely giving direction just isn't working. Consider these examples:

It is difficult for me to lead when no one is following. One can issue commands but that doesn't mean people are listening. Why are they not listening? Too often we believe the presence of our leadership will somehow magically turn an amorphous group of individuals into a focused community. Without the formation of community, people may acknowledge your responsibility but they will not necessarily accept the challenge to follow your leadership.

They won't do what I ask them to do! Perhaps they won't because you have not yet become their leader. Since you are not yet their leader, they are not yet your followers. Until community is formed, individualism prevails. Until community is formed, group members remain uninvested

in any potential outcomes. Until community is formed, all claims to leadership may be contested.

There just isn't any commitment. I can't count on anyone!

Too often there is a clear, simple reason behind such conditions: stage one leadership—forming community—has been overlooked or insufficiently developed. The resulting lack of community contributes to the absence of commitment. Without community,

There is no cohesiveness, no bonding together of the individual parts into a whole.

There may be a group, but there is no team.

► COMMUNITY DESIGN: WHAT DOES COMMUNITY LOOK LIKE?

What kind of community should be formed? It is important to answer this question with clarity and definition. Jesus knew exactly what kind of community He was about to form: a community of ministry. The Gospel stories define this community by describing it as a servant-ministry community. Moreover, this concept was analogous with His vision.

Members of this community understood the primary nature of their participation even if they could not quite pinpoint all they would be doing in the very near future. Even so, at this earliest stage, members of the community shared fundamental understandings that provided basic insight into the purpose and function of their community.

In order for community to become an agency of transformation or the vehicle by which a collective task, objective, or goal may be accomplished, it must have the power to attract and focus the attention of individuals so that the object of attention is stronger than the individual.

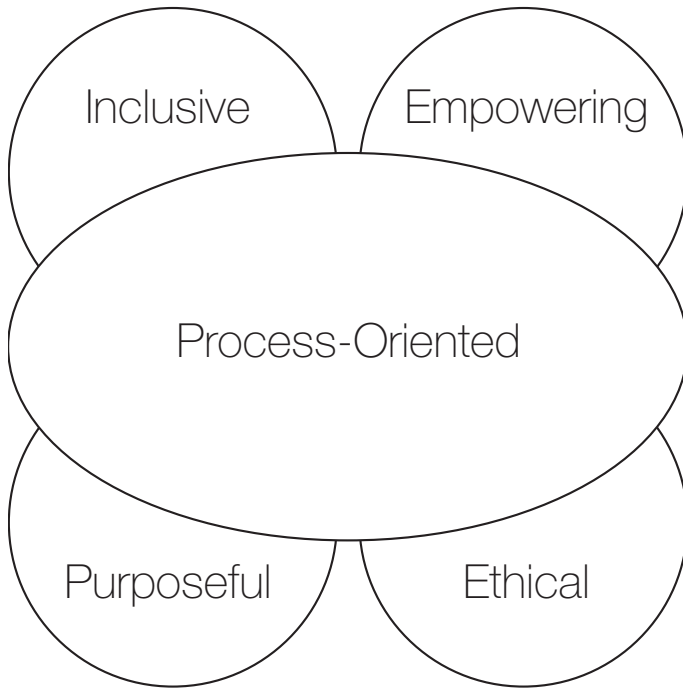
Before any action may be contemplated, the leader must address the issue of actually forming his or her community. When the individuals with whom you are assigned to work come together, they do not come as a community. They may share employment in the same office or corporation. They may attend the same church or belong to the same club. But regardless of affiliation to each other, the individuals inherently come together as a group and await clarification and information to refine their perspectives.

Additionally, the group may identify with the objective or purpose, but without sufficient motivation and inspiration, the likelihood of the specific action may never get started. As seen in the Gospels, it is within the community that Jesus began to motivate and inspire His disciples. It was in community with Him as they listened to His stories and parables that the big picture began to emerge. These experiences were sources of motivation and inspiration for them. Without a doubt, Jesus was such an effective leader that He could have individually motivated and inspired each disciple with His personal vision of ministry. In doing so, those individuals might have had enough enthusiasm to launch their mission. However, Jesus' leadership exemplifies His recognition of the exponential power that is available when the community is formed, motivated, and inspired to act.

Before we examine community formation in detail, let's visit community concepts and their relevance to leadership:

Forming community facilitates the formation of relationships or the enhancement and enrichment of existing relationships. Leadership in a postmodern environment is powered by relational energies. Below is a diagram

of relational leadership.¹ Each of the domains represents a value to be explored as well as affirmed in community formation.



Forming community releases the concentrated power of the group to focus on insights, experiences, and skill sets. The manner in which it does this is by incorporating the whole into a compelling narrative. The unique abilities and skills of disconnected individuals is multiplied when they are nourished, enriched, and defined in a common narrative.

Forming community adds breadth, depth, and scope to any endeavor. As investors, members of the community collateralize the task, objective, or goal with their abilities and skills.

Forming community facilitates bonding, acceptance, integration, and assimilation. Technically, groups may be structural communities. True community, however, is not formed until the group becomes an organic community. (The steps to becoming an organic community are found in the six leadership principles Jesus taught His disciples. As we work through them we will discover how they transform the perspectives as well as the potential the community possesses.)

► CAN'T WE JUST SING KUMBAYAH?

At this point you may ask, *What is the purpose of community formation?* Well, true leadership engages community formation through a set of exercises designed to achieve the characteristics of organic community. Thus, below are seven reasons for forming community. These reasons will help you think about the kinds of exercises useful in this process.

The exercises for community formation are as diverse as the people comprising your group. Obviously, the need for and results of these exercises will vary from group to group. Though they are open to creativity and playfulness, they must engender meaning, respect, and challenge.

1. Breaking Down Barriers

Forming community helps break down barriers between individuals, thus assisting them on their journey from the subjectivity of individualism to the objectivity of community and teamwork. One of the reasons such barriers exist is the presence of specific, disparate stories or narratives unique to each person. We live from our own story or narrative. Imagine a group of individuals all bringing their

stories together, but never discovering a meta-narrative that could offer them a means of connection, collaboration, and cooperation?

Exercise

In the diagram on relational leadership (see page 20), focus on the term inclusive. What does it mean to be included? How does it feel to be excluded? How would it impact your group's objective if a portion of the group members feel as though they have been excluded, or that they somehow didn't make it into the inner circle?

Think of activities that engage people. People who work with groups often call these activities icebreakers. Being as creative as necessary, develop some icebreaker ideas for your group. There are numerous resources available that provide exercises or activities geared to help people overcome the barriers that often separate us.

Community formation must be intentional. Hence, there is a need for intentionality on the part of the leader. The most effective activities are those that accomplish this element of community formation unobtrusively and without a lot of fanfare. Simple actions that signal intentionality in including everyone can help foster feelings of inclusion.

Using icebreakers may guarantee some level of familiarity, but will it really provide the nexus of community that is so essential to creative engagement? Probably not. However, until we

break down some of the artificial barriers,
illuminate some of the darkness,
and disarm the protective armor of resistance,

community formation will proceed at glacial speed, taking much longer to accomplish.

2. Empowering Each Group Member

Until we are convinced that there is a place for us in the larger narrative that characterizes our engagement, we remain skeptical about investment as a stakeholder. Forming community helps this perspective. It levels the playing field; it empowers the individual. Every person brings something to the table. It might be a sophisticated skill set, a certain experience, or a particular perspective. Others bring portfolio contributions like tenacity, boldness, courage, nurture, etc. No matter what is brought to the table, each person is celebrated and affirmed in the community, and their contribution welcomed and valued.

To achieve this, however, we must move beyond merely welcoming all to the table of participation; we must move toward empowerment. A community will experience reduced efficiency if too many of its members are spectators. Empowerment accelerates buy-in. It acknowledges the authenticity and value of each member's potential contribution. Indeed, it even goes beyond this—it actually validates and legitimizes his or her participation, giving it credibility and value to the whole.

One of the key elements in community is belonging. Until one feels like he or she belongs to the members of the group, it will always remain just that—a group. When there is a feeling of belonging, the typical feelings of suspicion, fear, inadequacy, and distrust give way to bold feelings that acknowledge one's place, potential contribution, and acceptance within the community. Once again, this is a function of empowerment.

Exercise

Effective leaders discover as quickly as possible the ar-

ray of contributions brought by the individual members of the group. Questions often facilitate this disclosure on the part of the participants. Research reveals that we level the playing field between participants by creating and encouraging empowering dialogue. One example might be simply asking members of the group to share their perspectives regarding the task, objective, or goal of the group. This is why story and narrative are so important to community formation.

Embedded within our individual stories, narratives, and responses are glimpses into our minds and hearts that reveal our priorities, values, interests, and experiences. Additionally, this self-disclosure may offer the value-added feature of revealing specific skills or responsibilities associated with previous experiences. Such revelations should be noted for their application to the group's new task or assignment.

3. Foster Equality

Forming community helps incorporate each member as an equal. Every task requires leadership, leadership which effectively harnesses the potential of the group in a community of diverse peers. Achieving equality-in-diversity is essential to proper community formation. These characteristics are functions of the term purposeful, as shown in the relational leadership diagram (see page 20). This quality has been defined as finding, "common ground with others to establish a common purpose."²

A true community will compile a powerful narrative based on the content of individual stories that are contributed to it. The diversity that is present is never obscured for the sake of an artificial unity. Rigidity and inflexibility

must yield to the creative expressions of experience and perspective. When our stories are accepted as essential to our being, and are celebrated as rich resources from which the community's new narrative will emerge, only then will true equality be fostered.

Exercise

Perhaps the simplest definition of peers or peer groups would be people who share similar challenges or who are in similar circumstances. Understanding the potential inherent in peer groups is important. What exactly do peer groups do? We can think of peer groups as having these characteristics:

They support each other.

They share their stories.

They ask questions about goals, conditions, skills, time frames, and other specific factors.

They provide feedback to each other.

Effective leaders who get things done find ways of tapping this tremendous resource. A leader's intentional effort to form community is the recognition of the importance of pairing individuals for mutual support and nurture. The heart of the compassionate leader consistently says, *We will leave no member of the community behind!*

This value is really a by-product and benefit of a process-orientation that engages everyone in the group. But it is more than just trying to be solicitous of everyone's feelings; it is about connecting the power sources present in the community that have yet to express their full potential. As long as we remain individuals, disconnected and discrete, no network exists through which the product of our processes can flow.

Focusing on a process-orientation allows the community to link together in a powerful network that can serve as a multiplier of potential efficiencies.

4. Engender Common Identity

Forming community fosters common identity. The terms *they* and *them* become *us* and *we*. Though words like *stakeholders* and *shared investment* may be overworked, they continue, however, to express valuable concepts essential to task or goal achievement.

A prominent business furniture manufacturer describes space in offices as *I* space and *we* space. At one time, a large, corner office with lots of *I* space was a symbol or badge of success. In our new, postmodern era, office architecture is changing to acknowledge the importance of community. The emphasis is now on developing significant accommodations of *we* space in office floor plans. When the group spends more time in *we* space, the possibility of engendering a common identity is enhanced.

Exercise

What does the term stakeholder really mean? It might refer to those who have an interest in a particular decision, either as individuals or as representatives of a group. This includes people who influence a decision, as well as those affected by it.

Stakeholders have a part to play in the overall process—individuals become stakeholders by participating in meaningful decision making of that process. Acknowledging the presence and affirming the value of the individual participant is one step toward making him or her a stakeholder.

Attentive listening is essential to transforming bystanders into stakeholders. Until someone has been heard,

their story remains untold; their voice silenced. Take some time to listen to your group members, helping them feel welcomed and wanted and that their contribution as a stakeholder is vital to the goal.

5. Reinforce Objectives

Forming community helps reinforce purpose and objectives. In this way, the community takes responsibility for fulfilling its purpose. Inherent in this shared sense of responsibility is the reinforcement of its original meaning. It does this by creating its own narrative, which tells a story of what the community members wish to accomplish, what they have achieved, and why they have invested themselves in their goals.

Leaders attempt to manipulate groups because it is possible to appeal to an element within the group known as the critical mass. Reinforcing objectives simply means, in this context, urging everyone to match certain performance goals, master certain procedures, and measure up to specific behaviors. By identifying the critical few and securing their cooperation, the group is reminded of its objectives and whether or not they are achieving them.

Community formation does not mean shoddy performance, missed targets, and deleterious behaviors. When a group becomes a community, they begin to care for their objectives and goals, and for each other. That servant-leadership becomes a tide that elevates all the boats in the harbor.

Exercise

Effective leadership is transparent. This transparency permits and encourages disclosures regarding purpose and objectives in clear and truthful ways. One significant product of such transparency is that it engenders belief in in-

tegrity while offering a comfort zone in which participants enjoy a sense of confidence. This also means modeling responsibility as well as initiative. The leader never stands outside the community!

Develop a checklist regarding the comfort levels of participants. If the environment does not encourage a minimal level of comfort, some participants may not be able to perform appropriately or even effectively. If that is the case, their presence may be more detrimental than productive.

Look for ways of tapping the nurturing potential that members of the community may possess. This nurturing will embrace those members who feel overwhelmed, confused, or even frightened by their involvement in the objectives of the larger community.

Above all, our interactions with the community must be ethical. Nothing will damage or distort the objective of the community than the substitution of less-than-ethical behaviors or standards. As a leader, you are asking for the investment and buy-in of every member in the community. Nothing but the highest ethical ideals will do!

6. Promote Participation

Forming community promotes total participation. While it may be true that some communities have only a shared sense of passive inertia, the opposite can be true as well! The community has the power to motivate its membership. It possesses the potential to nurture itself and discover sources of renewal.

But, unleashing the latent, cumulative powers of the community doesn't come instantly. It takes practice; it takes rehearsal. There is a powerful passage in the Old Testament book of Malachi that addresses the power of rehearsal:

Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the LORD and thought on his name (3:16, *NRSV*).

The community needs to rehearse its story in order to unleash renewal and reenergizing power for its purpose and objectives.

Exercise

What motivates participation? What motivates you? A key player in group participation is representation. Representation encourages participation. Think about and apply these questions to your group as you prepare to complete your assigned task or objective:

Is everyone in the community adequately represented?

Is their presence acknowledged? Are their viewpoints heard?

Are participants learning from each other?

Are all participants expected to be actively engaged?

Is a sense of trust being developed?

Another key component of participation is honor. Honoring each participant as a contributor and a necessary component of the bigger picture develops trust among the group participants. This trust can only benefit the accomplishments of the group.

How does your community rehearse its story?

7. Encourage Inclusiveness

Forming community requires encouraging inclusiveness by creating a sense of belonging and acceptance within the group. While this idea has been somewhat discussed in the points above, it is important to lay stress on this element of community formation. When the group has truly

become a community, equality moves from merely a nominal proposition in the group's bylaws to a core value held by each member of the group.

The community members must embrace each other with genuine hospitality. They must acknowledge and accept differences. They must responsibly speak truth when there are issues that endanger the narrative of the community. They must care deeply and support each member when there is need.

The community recognizes that no narrative or story can thrive without fresh inputs. Therefore, the group members implement a policy of inclusiveness by welcoming the stranger with hospitality and listening with their hearts.

Exercise

Earlier we mentioned the power of dialogue as a contributing element of effective community building. With the power of dialogue comes the importance of listening as a key component to inclusion. When we listen, we extend respect. When we respect another, credibility is gained. Credibility is a sign of acceptance and a strong, welcoming invitation to become a part of the community.

Effective leadership requires active listening skills. Even Jesus questioned the disciples when He said, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27, NRSV). Was it because Jesus did not truly know what they thought about Him? I don't think so. It seems that Jesus earnestly wanted to hear their point of view. What respect He showed them! He asked for their opinion, and when we sincerely ask another's opinion, we offer them inclusion.

Take some time to practice listening to—and thus, including—your group members. Suggest various troubled situations that require a probable solution. Ask for solu-

tions from your group member, allowing any and all solutions as possibilities. Maintain that listening to each other and offering inclusion into the group is the real exercise here, rather than finding the best solution.

► FIVE WAYS TO MAINTAIN COMMUNITY FORMATION

I have assembled a group of individuals. Can we now move on to achieving our task? Not necessarily. Community formation is not just about gathering a group of people and helping the dynamics flow as the individuals listen to each other. As a leader, your group will have a constant need for group maintenance—from within and as a whole. Remember: the focus of your group should be the final product. The process to achieving the goal needs to be the most efficient and productive configuration.

While the community will eventually acknowledge leadership abilities, roles, and responsibilities, if that leadership is continuously being challenged, it may be a sign that proper formation has not occurred. There is a difference between tweaking the process and challenging leadership. The former represents insightfulness, integrity, commitment, etc. The latter, however, may actually signify the early stages of mutiny! One sure way to tell the difference has to do with the level of energy within the community. Challenging leadership diminishes the stock of energy, while constructive and insightful criticism fuels the energy of the community.

Leaders committed to community formation continuously **check for signs of group member isolation**. Obviously, isolation can take on different forms. If some members remain isolated from each other, implement some

group exercises to regain unity within the group. These exercises must highlight elements that challenge and eliminate the presence of isolation.

Community formation is jeopardized if group members are indifferent to the needs and feelings of other members. How can the group tackle a larger challenge when it has not responded the needs of its own membership? As a leader, it is your responsibility to **recognize the needs and feelings of each individual**.

A lack of agreement about the task or goal of the group can risk community formation. Use your leadership skills to **usher the group toward an agreed perspective**. This will synchronize the groups' movements toward achieving the task.

Community loyalty is a key ingredient to a successfully formed community. If too many members waver in their loyalty to each other and to the group as a whole, the groups' identity and goal are compromised. As a leader, it is important that you **create an environment of loyalty** in which your group members will want to—and see the need to—retain that environment.

Energy, imagination, and motivation are all key players in effective group accomplishment. However, there is little or no community if the leader is the sole provider of these three factors. Find ways for the group members to **foster a sense of energy, imagination, and motivation** during each meeting.

► TIME FOR DIAGNOSTICS

What links people together? What are their commonalities? How does one bring diverse individuals together,

thus crumbling barriers and permitting those individuals to reach out to each other to touch the spirit within? While there are many sources for developing community, the best strategies seem to emerge from leaders who clearly understand the group with whom they are working. Linking, networking, and engaging are all terms that describe the process of community formation.

For those working in churches and in groups within our faith communities, we have numerous built-in advantages. We can worship together. We can fellowship together. We can share. Indeed, there are as many ways to experience community-forming exercises as there are occasions calling us together!

However, there is another side to consider: What if there is a demonstrable absence of community? What happens then? In this case, it is time to reassess the group. Apply the following diagnostic questions as you study the makeup and performance of your group.

Is the group too large to become a community? While this is not likely, it is possible that the group is composed of too many lone rangers intent on preserving their space and keeping their distance from others. At this point, the group may need to be reconfigured in order for it to be effective. If this is the case, the group might initially consider itself a focus group, with the smaller, reconstituted group moving on a trajectory toward community.

Is the history of the group one of voluntary alignment, or was the group assembled without the choice or input of the individuals? If the group was commandeered into existence, leadership of the group will require patience and creativity as he or she guides the group through exercises and experiences leading to community formation.

Has enough time been spent working on community formation and related exercises? Sometimes it takes more than singing one song or reciting one prayer. It may require fellowshiping together, worshipping together, and even playing together for the group to creep toward community.

Does the leadership model community? If there is disconnect between what is said and what is practiced by the leadership, the group will always take its cues from what is modeled, not what is preached.