



Growth and Barriers

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE NUMBERS

By Damian Gerke (August 3, 2010)

The Story

The church started out like many new churches, with a familiar story line: Enterprising and likeable church planter creates buzz with dynamic vision, high energy and great communication skills — not to mention a cool shirt and a soul patch. Compelling story leads to promising core group, a successful September launch and respectable response. By the following May, Sunday morning attendance is 137 (everyone gets counted in a church plant), and plans are made to bring on a part-time worship leader to go along with the volunteer children's pastor.

The additional staffing horsepower increases the programming and upgrades the quality. By the end of the second spring and a strong Easter service, attendance is up to 240 (now they're comfortable rounding the number). More of the same brings the church to 320 by the third spring. After another year the church is looking at 380, with a few more new faces at staff meeting and a boatload of decisions about a possible second service.

The church has made good progress, but it's not been easy. The Lead Pastor is weary, as is the dedicated staff and — at a different level — his wife. The casualty list is higher than anyone would like to mention. The original worship leader followed God's leading to another ministry, and some of the core group became uncomfortable. Grateful for having made it this far and concerned about what's next, the church now faces one of the most significant seasons in its life.

The Fallout

Many would call this a healthy start. In fact, it might be. They've managed to break through the first major growth barrier. Whether they make it through the second is questionable.

The idea of growth barriers is a common one in ministry. The first barrier is encountered somewhere around 200 in weekly attendance, and the second follows at 400. Then comes 800, 1,500, and 3,000 (give or take a few percentage points). Above 3,000 the air starts to get a little rare. Fewer churches reach this altitude, and the ones that do report varying challenges that aren't strictly correlated to attendance.

Many factors contribute to these barriers: Facilities, budget, staffing, personalities, economy, seasonal impact, multi-campus strategies, etc. But the factor that most contributes to growth barriers is — unfortunately — the one that is least recognized: Leadership.

Growth is usually evaluated in terms of programs and processes: Ministries, small groups, facilities, spans of care, capacity, traffic flow, level of quality, etc. All of these are vital and appropriate. But they are all secondary to leadership.

When the organization is relatively small, the lead pastor can keep a finger on the pulse of most every area in the church. With staff in place, he can direct the day-to-day operations at a tactical level, responding quickly to stimuli and changes.

However, as the organization grows the number of details increases exponentially, becoming so complex that no one person can keep it all in view, much less manage it. Depending on the setting and the lead pastor's ability, this usually occurs between the 400 and 800 barriers.

The First Problem

This is the first problem with growth and barriers: The senior leader's disassociation from day-to-day management of the church. This involves releasing both the responsibility and the authority for key management decisions. It requires submitting to the reality that there are people better equipped to make those decisions — a step that many pastors, frankly, are simply not prepared to take.

It also requires having the right leaders to delegate to. The most common pitfall for churches in this phase is the selection of non-leaders, a step that virtually guarantees ongoing involvement of the lead pastor.



The Second Problem

A second problem is that the awareness of this leadership transition happens far too late. The church planting process is usually front-loaded with an entrepreneurial, “whatever-it-takes” attitude. Unfortunately, by the time the church’s foundation has been set it is now playing catch-up on leadership development.

Things would be much different if establishing a leadership culture, a functional leadership base, a pattern of delegation or effective management systems were an integral part of the pre-launch strategy — rather than trying to install them midstream.

The Solution

We consistently see this commitment to leadership development in churches that have exhibited healthy, sustained growth through the usual growth barriers. An executive pastor at an effective, high-altitude church recently identified three keys to his church’s growth.

1. **Hire Well.** This requires a seasoned skill to hire people with leadership ability, not just ministry capability. Hire leaders, they will naturally find the gifted people they need to effectively run their ministry area.
2. **Delegate Well.** The first was the volitional choice of the lead pastor to give away executive management authority, focusing instead on championing the vision of the church and partnering with those who run the church.
3. **Manage Well.** Leaders must be managed well. They must have a sound strategy to implement. They must be challenged, supported and held accountable. They should be coached to accelerate their ongoing development. And they must be succeeded by emerging leaders.

Leadership and growth go hand in hand. The sooner a church establishes and exercises its leadership development process — so that leadership becomes a DNA-level process — the sooner growth barriers will turn into growth milestones.

