

# Effective Teams in Student Ministry

Rich Lamb, 1994

Is your InterVarsity Chapter leadership (or exec) team characterized by any of the following descriptions?

- A few key individuals serve in multiple roles doing most of the planning and work.
- Teams only rarely find time to meet together; the work is accomplished by phone coordination and individuals working on separate tasks.
- Things decided in team meetings aren't acted upon; tasks delegated to individuals are forgotten or left undone.
- People on a team perceive team meetings as a waste of time, even counter-productive to their fulfilling their ministry roles.
- Team members do not value relationships with others on the team and regard as a waste time spent team building.
- Team members come late to and/or leave early from team meetings.
- The team has a difficulty evaluating honestly the contribution of its members.
- Some team members resent others on the team either for not doing their share of the work or for not allowing others to contribute to the overall task.
- Teams are designed with no concern for how team members will be able to work with one another.
- Not all members of the team chose to come to chapter camp.

In Christian ministry and overseas missions we have seen the explosion of the use of the term "team": "pastoral team," "medical missions team," "evangelism team," "worship team," "church planting team." So now in Inter-Varsity we no longer have "Executive Committees," but rather "Exec Teams" or "Leadership Teams." This is a helpful change, but only if the dynamics of our ministry match the changing terms.

## Definition and Examples of Team

For the purposes of this article, I will define a team as follows:

**Team:** *a group of people who must work together to accomplish a common task.*

In order better to illustrate what a team is, let us also consider what a team is not.

First of all, a team is not merely a group, defined here as *a collection of individuals gathered together to meet the individual needs of the members*. In a group, what members receive from it is all that matters; there is no common task. If an individual's needs are not being satisfied in the group, he or she will simply drop out and the group will go on without that person. If an individual has pressing concerns that conflict with a particular group meeting, the individual chooses not to attend the group because his or her needs are better met through doing so. Again, the group continues to function without the individual. The relationships between members are important to the extent they fulfill the needs of the individuals who make up the group. This definition applies to small group Bible study meetings, large group fellowship meetings, church meetings, even academic class meetings. People will attend a group only as long as they feel served, as their own interests are met in some recognizable way. This is not bad or wrong, but this does not describe a team.

Secondly, a team is not a *committee*, a group of people officially delegated to perform a function, usually planning or decision-making. Committees are often composed of members of different constituencies, with different personal concerns. The relationships between committee members are often of little or no importance. Perhaps the best committees work like a team. Most often, however, committees organize around a task, like a team does, yet generate little relational “team spirit.” As a result, attendance is irregular, work is slow and the commitment sinks to the lowest common denominator. The committee members don’t really desire to be together; they may not even like one another. It is no surprise that in our society the term “committee” often conjures up negative images; no one welcomes the chance to be on one, and committees are the butt of many jokes.

A team is different. Imagine your team—the professional sports team you root for. How different from a small group or church committee! For any sports team, participation and involvement of all players is essential to the functioning of the team and the accomplishment of the goal: victory. Team members make great personal sacrifices of time and schedule because of their commitment to one another and the common goal. A successful team generates and thrives upon a deep personal loyalty between team members. Without these commitments a team cannot long remain a team. Relationships are therefore crucial to the accomplishment of the objectives. “Team spirit” is all important.

### **Team Nomenclature vs. Team Mentality**

Student Christian groups have tended to borrow terms and structures either from the church or from the business world. This left us with terms like “executive committee” and “prayer meeting.” Both the business world and the ministry world are catching on to the pragmatic value of teams. Correspondingly, many student fellowships have embraced “team” nomenclature, getting rid of the word “committee” (and even “exec”) and replacing it with more functional words like “visioning team,” “servants team,” etc. With the change in terms it is tempting to think that we have already completed the rethinking process about ministry teams and strategy.

Yet it is probably obvious to anyone who has been on a new ministry team that simply calling it a team does not automatically make it *feel* like a team. The purpose of this article is to help would-be team members and team leaders get beyond the team nomenclature to embrace a team mentality that will make help your teams and your fellowship be more effective *and enjoyable*.

It is crucial to understand that the most important agenda we have as Christians, and as leaders of Christian groups, is relationships. Relationships are not only the necessary means to accomplishing the ends toward which we work, but very much are ends in themselves. We don’t have to look much deeper than the two greatest commandments, “Love God” and “Love your neighbor” to see that relationships are critical in the kingdom of God.

What I mean by “team” involves taking seriously the relationships between members of the team. Since a team “must work together” to accomplish its objective, relational breakdowns which prevent working together must be addressed. Furthermore, since the task we have—the advancement of the gospel—is itself relational, relationships between team members become even more important in ministry than in sports or business. No task is worth accomplishing at the expense of reconciled, healthy relationships with others on the team. The worship team cannot hope to lead the fellowship in worship of God if they themselves work and worship together only with quarreling, not listening to one another or valuing one another, and not reconciling when sin enters their relationships with each other. Likewise the exec team cannot hope to shepherd and lead the fellowship towards right relationships with God when their relationships with one another are filled with jealousy and resentment, competition and unresolved conflict.

## **Principles of Building a Chapter Around Teams**

Forming a group of people into a committed and effective team is not as simple as changing the name of the group from “Committee” to “Team”. The team leader or those who are trying to forge the team must begin to *think* differently about the group, its task, and the process it goes through to accomplish its task. Likewise, organizing an entire fellowship around a team strategy involves more than having each small group led by two leaders, rather than a single leader. Let me isolate and emphasize certain principles of building your campus fellowship around a team development strategy. I will summarize them here and then discuss them more thoroughly below.

- The team selection process is guided by the importance of relationships on the fledgling team.
- The relationships between members of a team are as important as any agenda topic, issue or decision that the team is working on.
- The relational issues that come up in the team get worked out, as much as possible, in the team setting.
- The people on a ministry team should be models of good relationships to the people to whom the team is trying to minister.
- Ministry by teams takes more time than ministry by individuals.
- Tasks should be delegated, as much as possible, to teams of people led by a team builder.

### **1. The team selection process is guided by the importance of relationships.**

A team is chosen much differently than the way a committee is selected. People are considered not simply for their gifts and maturity, but also for their ability to work with others on their teams. Jesus did not choose his disciples by selecting one member from each of a dozen different occupations and geographical regions in Judea and Galilee. Rather, he concentrated his choices in one town and one occupation. Four of his twelve were partners in a small fishing concern on Lake Galilee. James, John, Peter and Andrew came into the band of twelve as brothers, good friends, and business partners. They had a deep appreciation for their relationships with one another before joining Jesus in his venture to transform all of their relationships.

If “team” members are chosen to represent different constituencies, then don’t be surprised when team members seek to protect their own interests more than to work well with each other. Rather, choose your team so that members complement one another’s gifts but are able to be committed to a common task and to the quality of relationships necessary. This means that someone who is more gifted but obstinate and unteachable may not be suitable for a leadership position while others who are better “team players” take roles.

### **2. Team relationships are as important as any agenda topic, issue or decision.**

This principle may seem counter-productive to the stated purpose of the team’s existence. “If it is a ministry team, certainly the ministry must go forward!” To state that team relationships are a critical priority could appear to endanger the accomplishment of the team’s objectives. But that is only how it seems.

In John 13:34-35, Jesus says that by his disciples’ love for one another the world will know that they are in fact his disciples. Somehow, the effectiveness of their witness to the world rides or falls on their ability to love each other. The world will be a witness—the world will know whether or not they love each other. Likewise for us, team relationships must have equal priority with the good ministry we are committed to, *for the sake of the ministry*. As a team leader or pace-setting member, you are able to communicate through words and actions that you are willing to take the relationships on the team seriously.

Much lies at stake if we do not pursue integrity and quality in our team's relationships—including and especially the team's purpose. As I said earlier, it is impossible that an unreconciled worship team would be able consistently to lead a fellowship into worship (especially given Jesus' commands in Matthew 5:23-26). Likewise, leaders who don't know how to serve one another cannot effectively serve the chapter. When the exec is characterized by jealousy, mistrust and resentment between exec members, the fellowship as a whole will probably look much the same.

Furthermore, how the team comes together during the early sessions of the team's existence is critical for setting a relational tone. It is important that team members value getting to know one another and their different backgrounds, gifts and interests, and reasons for participating in the team. Early on in the life of the team, spend lots of time in casual and non-agenda settings such as seeing movies together, going out to dinner, etc. For example, sports teams do this all the time. The new recruits must go through a mild form of hazing, with activities unrelated to the team sport involved, but activities which will build camaraderie and "team spirit". Be creative and think about edifying ways to accomplish similar ends for the team you are trying to form.

One year while I was on staff in Santa Cruz, California, I was to be working with a large exec of nine people, organized in two teams. The challenge of so many relationships required something bold, so we decided to begin our time together by traveling together for a couple of weeks at the end of the summer. The nine students and three staff piled into three cars and drove 1800 miles north, through Oregon, Seattle and on to British Columbia and Vancouver Island. We stopped at nights in campgrounds and inner-city and InterVarsity ministries we knew about along the way. After two weeks of life on the road, we were glad to rest before new student outreach began. But the bonding experience we had was formative for a successful year of ministry as teammates.

### **3. The relational issues get worked out, as much as possible, in the team setting.**

This is simply a corollary of the previous principle. It means that interpersonal conflict and challenge, reconciliation and forgiveness will often be addressed in the team setting. This is a very difficult step. Often in an exec meeting one of the members of the team says something which negatively affects group dynamics. The comment perhaps contains a little sarcasm, or resentment, or defensiveness, or pointed humor, or something else which is distancing the person from the rest of the team. Or perhaps one member cut off another, clearly not listening to the discussion. Now I have a choice: I can decide a) to ignore the comment altogether, b) to wait until after the meeting and then approach the individual who made the comment and try to clear it up privately, or c) to stop the discussion going on and focus the attention of the team on the comment and what was behind the comment for the individual. Given that I have decided the comment is worth pursuing, I must decide between a private or public setting in which to pursue it.

Much as it goes against our inclination, there is often much to be gained by having the interaction take place in the context of the team itself. First of all, a resolution of the issue privately may not ultimately satisfy all those who were adversely affected, including the offended individuals and anyone who felt the sting of the comment. Addressing the conflict in the group allows all the members of the team to feel reconciled and at peace with the issue once agreement is found and forgiveness is asked for and given. Secondly, the other members of the team are drawn into closer relationships with one another as they work together to understand each other and to forgive and be forgiven. The energy going into this time of conflict and resolution is relational "money in the bank" for future conflict and can keep the team from breaking up under the stress of deep unresolved conflict and tension. Thirdly, the group is able to live out and model the very relational standards to which the team, especially if it is a leadership team or the exec, is trying to call the rest of the fellowship. Finally, handling conflict and bringing about resolution, and taking team

relationships seriously in general, is an important leadership skill. Taking time to model and practice this in the context of the team will contribute to the leadership and personal Christian maturity development of the members of the team.

I am not saying here that I always handle conflict in teams in a public way; simply that I refuse to listen to my first cowardly intuition to wait until later. If any members of the team are not sufficiently secure in the team setting or sufficiently mature to work with the issue at hand, confrontation may undermine their growth. I use as a model the model of Jesus. James and John attempt to pull Jesus aside for a private request, to sit at his right and left in his coming glory. Jesus did not privately deal with James' and John's misunderstanding about the nature of Christian leadership. Rather, he brought them back to the group and taught all of his disciples what his version of servant leadership was like (Mark 10:35-45), addressing as well the sense of indignation the other disciples had already begun to feel. After Peter's public boast in the upper room—that he would be the sole disciple not to fall away—Jesus publicly predicted Peter's triple denial (Mark 14:29-31). Jesus was quite willing to engage in group challenge, and saw something of value for the rest of the disciples in his doing so.

So when issues come up in a team meeting I ask myself two questions: 1) What would this person have to gain by my addressing this issue in the team setting? and 2) What would the team have to gain by addressing this issue in this setting? If the answers to both of these questions are hopeful, then I will often launch into the conflict resolution or challenge for the sake of the individual or individuals involved and for the sake of the team.

#### **4. The team should model good relationships with one another for the sake of others.**

When the “task” of a ministry team is to build good relationships, it might seem efficient simply for each team member to focus on relationships with people outside the ministry team. For example, an obvious goal for a small group leader team is to develop good relationships with those who begin to come to the small group. What is the most efficient and effective way to do this? The leaders could try a “divide and conquer” approach, dividing the group and each trying to develop deeper relationships with one portion of the total group. This means that effectively, they are no longer meaningful partners and teammates, but simply colleagues, each respecting the work and ministry of the other but not committed to a *common* task for which they must work together.

But another way to reach out would be to use a team-oriented relational strategy. With a focus on teamwork, no simple division can be made between who reaches out to whom, but each partner is involved in reaching several small group members. This strategy requires much more communication and partnership between the leaders. They will often work together, spending casual, social time together with members of their group. The leaders will arrange intentional time with smaller subgroups of the entire group. Of course, the leaders will also meet from time to time individually with members of the small group, but the goal is not simply having strong individual relationships with the members. Each leader desires to draw all the members into stronger relationships with one another. Each leader has relationships with several members of the group, but none of the leaders must know every member equally well. Each member of the group has one or more relationships with a leader, and has growing relationships with other group members.

We can also apply the team strategy approach to evangelism through the small group. Inter-Varsity celebrates the effectiveness of “friendship evangelism,” but that may mean simply one-to-one friendships with non-Christians. Yet the model of two people as a team reaching out to a wider group can be applied to a couple of Christians, perhaps roommates or friends in the same dorm, reaching out to their friends and dorm mates together as a team to a group. For example, one of our small groups decided to become an evangelistic team. They began with the hypothesis that God was perhaps more urgently at work in people whom several of them knew. They made a

list of all the non-Christians that more than one of them had relationships with, and then began to invite these people to the weekly Bible study. For weeks after that new people came every week. A few stayed. Several became Christians.

Many advantages of this strategy stand out. Evangelism is seen as something done in partnership, not in isolation from other Christians. Non-Christians are drawn into relationships with multiple Christians and see the quality of their relationships with one another. One agnostic student said to the group of friends reaching out to him, “Your love for one another is the strongest proof I’ve seen for the existence of God.” (He became a Christian a few weeks later.) Finally, with this model, when non-Christians decide they want to move forward, there is a logical place for them to do it. Even before non-Christians join a small group or become Christians, they are incorporated into the web of relationships of the fellowship. At that point, the barriers to joining a small group are much reduced.

A common result of the “divide and conquer” approach is that leaders become more committed to the people they are reaching out to than the people they are reaching out with. They justify this as a result of their deep commitment to quality ministry and the desire to serve younger students or non-Christians. Yet the irony is that this will actually hurt the people they are reaching out to. In a misguided attempt to be loyal to the people they are reaching out to, they are modeling a lack of partnership and a low commitment to peer relationships. Jesus told the disciples that it was their *love for one another* that would be a testimony to the world. Too often Christians leaders cannot love other peers and so part company and split off to form new churches, groups and denominations. This is the opposite of Jesus’ call to his disciples. When we do not value relationships with our partners, this will foster mistrust and broken partnership between leaders, and will build insecurity, fear and competition in group members.

So it is in a ministry team leading younger students. We want to model relationship where both members are deeply committed to the health and continuance of the ministry partnership. Team members must have and work toward high standards of loyalty and honesty and reconciliation in their relationship with one another. This will be a powerful force in the discipling and training of younger students in the small group or in the fellowship.

### **5. Ministry by teams takes more time than ministry by individuals.**

I was speaking about a team-oriented ministry strategy one time and someone listening to me responded: “This sounds like so much more work!” His concern was for leaders’ time, and he correctly perceived that a team-intensive strategy would place added time demands on leaders. Is it really worth it?

Perhaps that is your response. After all, being on a team of two leaders for a single small group, one might hope that the amount of work and time necessary would be decreased somewhat, if not cut in half. But in reality the amount of work goes up, because the quality of relationships expected and enjoyed also goes up. The leaders must spend more time with one another, and not simply with the members of their small group.

However, this is where the value of being on a team really shines. Think about your college’s football, basketball, or swim team. Why will players on those teams spend extravagant amounts of time together? Because the goal demands it and *because they are not alone*. Obviously, 6:00 AM swim practices would be difficult if not impossible to face if the entire team were not in the water together swimming laps and losing sleep.

The same dynamic is at work in a college fellowship characterized by a deep sense of teamwork and partnership. Sure, it takes more time, lots of time, but the effort is purposeful and the rewards are clear. It is easy to burn out when you carry a burden alone for long periods of time,

but burnout is much less likely if you are experiencing true partnership and high quality team relationships in the midst of the struggle.

So do not misunderstand the attractiveness of being a part of a team—the amount of time involved will go up. Yet the value of the time, the enjoyment of the work, and the fruitfulness of the ministry will increase even more.

## **6. Tasks should be delegated, as much as possible, to teams of people led by a team builder.**

The team leader should be able to call people together around the purpose of the team and be aware of and deal with relational issues that come up. Often, minute tasks are delegated to a single individual. Even when larger tasks are delegated to a team, the differentiation of subtasks often means people still work alone and can feel the burden of their responsibility alone. We opt for the assembly line approach, where each person has a separate piece of the overall project, with the minimum coordination necessary. Our intuition tells us that it is more efficient to delegate specific responsibilities to individuals this way, but people thus miss out on an important aspect of the leadership training that comes along with working hard at being an effective team. We miss out on an opportunity to develop people if we just simply assign manageable jobs to individuals who then do not need to expend the energy to work at decision-making and planning together. Relationships are at the center of our ministry in both its form and its function, but assigning jobs to single individuals communicates something different. Often, it communicates that accomplishing the particular assigned task is more important than the relationships the person may be in or could be working on. Delegation to a single individual may sometimes save time, but the time savings may come at the expense of relationships, which are at the very center of our purpose.

In contrast, if we are able to delegate large enough tasks to a team such that people will need to work together to accomplish a common purpose, then a true team experience is possible. For example, consider two different ways to delegate the leadership of the daily prayer meeting for a given week. One way might be to call and ask five people each to take one day and lead it, however he or she chose. Another might be to ask one small group to plan a week's worth of daily prayer times, with a coordinated theme and sense of continuity throughout the week. The second way would certainly take more time, but might produce more ownership of the daily prayer meeting on the part of that small group. It might also yield more creative and dynamic prayer meetings as the small group gives thought and time to its leadership during the week. It also might yield stronger relationships between small group members.

Critical to a team's effectiveness is the team builder who is self-conscious about the team's development. This person, often by temperament as well as by role, looks out for other members of the team and brings different gifts and abilities together in a way to effect the smooth functioning of the team. A team builder is less concerned with any specific role he or she might take than that all members are able to contribute in meaningful ways. A team builder is also able to spot potential new members to the team, and is a hospitable advocate for new members to feel welcome in the team setting.

For example, at one time in our fellowship we had difficulty finding experienced worship leaders. Those who led worship were more skilled at playing than at training potential new leaders. Then along came a student, Jan, who was gifted musically but who was even more gifted at bringing together a team. He trained several new guitarists and taught them how to train others. His energy and love for his worship team meant eventually that he stepped back from leading in order to allow those he brought into the worship team to take larger roles. He developed a self-replicating worship team, and no longer did the fellowship have a difficulty finding new worship leaders every year.

Your fellowship could come to have many different types of teams. Specific outreach is often done with teams of people, such as a new student outreach team, an evangelistic outreach team (say, in preparation for bringing a national evangelistic speaker), investigative Bible discussion teams, a publicity team. Teams can be organized to prepare and participate in large group meetings, such as a worship team, a prayer team, or a drama team. Imagine, for example, a large group meeting where one quarter of those present have contributed to the meeting in some way, through involvement in one of these teams. This would dramatically spread ownership, build consistency in quality and attendance, increase vision, identify and develop gifts, and help to avoid burnout. Finally, in InterVarsity there is a growing emphasis on summer missions teams, sending when possible more than one student from the same fellowship on the same summer missions project, rather than sending individuals out alone.

What are the advantages of a team strategy? Teams produce more commitment, energy and drive than do “committees” or “groups,” and they produce results. But foundationally, teams reflect the very heart of the gospel, which is taking relationships seriously and working hard at their growth, while advancing the gospel through their effective functioning.

### **Where to Go From Here**

One way I like to think about the team ministry strategy is that the essential ministry component anywhere in the fellowship is the “team” ministering to a “group.” The exec team ministers to the group of leaders. Small group leader teams reach out to their small groups. Evangelistic ministry teams witness to their friends in a coordinated way. The worship team leads the Large Group into praise of God. In each setting, there is a self-conscious subset who must work together to accomplish God’s purposes in leading a larger and more amorphous group of people. Over time, each member of each larger group is invited in a variety of ways to join a team of people, replicating the ministry as this happens.

Of course, this is something of an ideal scenario. The reality is that this process is never complete. Leaders graduate and new people enter every year. A comprehensive team strategy cannot be implemented all at once. However, there are ways that the principles discussed above can be incorporated more and more into the life of your chapter and the existing team structures. First of all, think about your chapter. Identify the existing ministry teams, and think about the extent to which they are now operating as teams, groups of people who must work together to accomplish a common task. Consider, just for example:

- Mission teams: Exec team, Small Group/Bible Study leader teams, Summer mission team
- Outreach teams: New Student Outreach, Evangelistic Outreach, Publicity
- Large Group Teams: Worship, Drama, Prayer

Each fellowship is unique. I have tried to emphasize principles, not specific structures. The principles discussed above can be incarnated in as many different structures as there are campus fellowships, and even in the same fellowship from year to year their implementation will look different. With this emphasis on real teamwork and partnership, the structures of our fellowships will catch up to the rhetoric of team ministry.