

The top half of the cover features a dark blue background with numerous white, curved lines representing star trails, creating a sense of motion and depth.

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TRUE NORTH GROUPS

**A Powerful Path
to Personal
and Leadership
Development**

Foreword by Richard J. Leider



An Excerpt From

***True North Groups:
A Powerful Path to Personal and Leadership Development***

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Finding Depth and Intimacy in Your Life

WE YEARN TO SHARE THE STORIES OF OUR LIVES AND to have honest conversations with people we trust. Have you ever felt alone in a crowd? Were you eager to abandon the superficial conversations and share your authentic self and your feelings without fear of being judged?

We need people around us to whom we can look for support and advice, who can help us develop as human beings. We need them to help us become better leaders in our work, our communities, and our families. We want to be open and vulnerable, but who can we rely on to have our best interests at heart and maintain our confidentiality? Where can we find this kind of depth, intimacy, and support in our lives? Who do we talk to when we have great joy or sorrow in our lives or are facing difficult decisions?

The challenges we face these days are so great that we cannot rely entirely on ourselves, our communities, or our organizations to support us and help us stay on track. We need a small group of people with whom we can have in-depth discussions and share intimately about the most important things in our lives—our happiness and sadness, our hopes and fears, our beliefs and convictions.

We call these groups True North Groups because they help us follow our True North. As Bill wrote in his book by that name, True North represents what is most important to

us in life: our beliefs, our most cherished values, our passions and motivations, and the sources of satisfaction in our lives. True North is the orienting point that keeps us on track as human beings and as leaders. It represents who we are at our deepest level.

Most of us know what our True North is, but we are constantly pressured by external forces to deviate from it. Or we are seduced by extrinsic rewards like money, power, and recognition that cause us to detour from our True North.

We created True North Groups to address our need for a support team to enable us to get through challenging times and to be there for us in good times and bad. By bridging the gap between our individual lives and the organizations and communities we engage every day, True North Groups can help us find joy and fulfillment in our lives. They can help us develop as authentic leaders who can make a difference in our world.

Before digging into what a True North Group is and why you would want to join one, we would like to share our stories of how we got interested in small groups.

BILL'S STORY

All my life I have been passionate about leadership. From observing leaders at a young age to leading business organizations and working with leaders committed to making a difference, I've always wanted to be engaged with leaders and with leading.

In my early years, I was never asked to lead anything, as I was too eager to get ahead. In high school and college, I was devastated as I lost seven consecutive elections, until some older friends helped me get on track. After that, I had many opportunities to lead organizations in college and graduate

school before plunging into the world of business. There I spent ten years each at Litton Industries, launching the consumer microwave oven business, and at Honeywell, in a variety of executive leadership roles. It wasn't until 1989 that I arrived at Medtronic's doorstep, where I spent the best thirteen years of my professional career.

Following a weekend retreat in 1975, Doug Baker and I formed a True North Group. We didn't call it that in those days; instead, it was our "renewal group" that enabled us to renew ourselves each week. In 1983, we also formed a couples group of eight that includes our spouses and two other couples who are close friends.

In addition to my wife, Penny's, love and counsel, the people in these two groups have done more to help me develop as a whole human being and an authentic leader than anything else in my life. They have helped increase my self-awareness, sensitivity to others, and self-acceptance.

In the early years, they helped me recognize I was trying so hard to get ahead that I was behaving very differently in my work and community than at home and in my personal life. That led me to "decompartmentalize" my life by attempting to be the same person at home, at work, and in the community—with less facade and more authenticity.

When I hit the wall in my Honeywell career—something most of us have to confront at some point—our men's group helped me acknowledge that I was striving too hard to become CEO and was in danger of losing sight of my True North. Back in 1988, I was on the fast track to the top of Honeywell. Elected executive vice president in 1983, I took over a large organization where I discovered lots of problems as I dug deeply into each of the businesses.

Just as we were getting these businesses in shape, I was asked to take over a new set of businesses and get them turned around. In late 1987, I was given responsibility for the

third major turnaround, where we uncovered nearly \$500 million in cost overruns on fixed-price government contracts that had to be written off.

One day in 1988, I was driving home on a beautiful fall day when I looked at myself in the mirror and realized I was deeply unhappy. In that instant flash in the mirror, I recognized that I was losing sight of my True North. I was striving so hard to get to the top that I was moving away from being an inspirational, growth-oriented leader. When I told Penny what I was feeling, she said, “Bill, I have been trying to tell you that for the past year, but you didn’t want to listen.” Often it is the people closest to us who see us as we are and can recognize our blind spots.

The next morning I shared my feelings with our group. They were helpful in confirming the changes they had seen in me and sharing their perceptions about my growing unhappiness. They suggested I rethink the opportunity to join Medtronic that I had turned down the previous summer. Later that week, I called Medtronic back, which opened up the best move of my career—one that I couldn’t see without the help of my wife and my men’s group.

In 1996, Penny was diagnosed with breast cancer. I’ll never forget our couples group sitting together beneath the surgical room at Abbott Northwestern Hospital while she was having her mastectomy. Even with that support, I struggled to face the risks Penny faced and to share her fears. My men’s group pointed out that I seemed to be in denial about the uncertainty of her health, probably due to losing both my mother and my first fiancée to cancer early in life. That allowed me to stop trying to “fix it” and to just be a support person for Penny, an entirely new role for me.

Ten years ago, I concluded my business career and went on a wilderness journey to contemplate what lay ahead. Whatever I explored—from health care to international

relations, corporate governance, government service, and education—my thoughts always came back to leadership.

Thanks to the trauma associated with the fall of Enron and dozens of companies whose executives got them into trouble, I found a new calling in helping others become more authentic leaders—from my MBA students to CEOs. Through this experience, I learned I could have greater impact in helping others lead effectively than I could in leading myself. As I wrote *Authentic Leadership, True North*, and two other books on leadership, I realized that my thesis is always the same: we need a new generation of authentic leaders to become values-centered leaders guiding great organizations.

After retiring from Medtronic and spending two years teaching in Switzerland and at Yale School of Management, I joined the faculty of Harvard Business School in 2004 to teach a new course called Leadership and Corporate Accountability. I soon realized there was an absence of leadership development courses for MBA students.

In interviewing leaders in 2005–06 for *True North* and reviewing transcripts from 125 leaders, our research team concluded that one of the keys to sustaining your leadership is having a support team around you. In addition to your spouse, partner, or mentor, we recognized that a support group was the most important thing people could do to stay grounded and increase their self-awareness.

In 2005, I introduced a new elective course at Harvard Business School called Authentic Leadership Development. To encourage greater intimacy and more opportunities for personal sharing, we created six-person groups, modeled after our men's group. These groups are identical to the True North Groups described in these pages. The group meetings are official classes, accounting for 50 percent of the course. Unique in the Harvard Business School curriculum, these

small groups are consistently rated by MBAs as the course's highlight and one of the most important experiences in their MBA programs.

In the past seven years, more than 1,100 Harvard MBAs have participated in these groups. Due to the course's popularity, the school is considering broadening its availability to all students. Most recently, we introduced a five-day version of the course for senior executives. In their evaluations, the participants were uniformly enthusiastic about their small, six-person groups. They scored the small groups higher than any other aspect of the course, saying they were the most valuable part of their experience. It was remarkable that this could happen in just five days, especially since they had never met the people in their group before the program.

True North Groups have also been used successfully by the Young Global Leaders of the World Economic Forum, global corporations, and other educational institutions, such as New York University and Georgia Tech. Similar groups, like the Forum of the Young Presidents' Organization, have operated successfully for decades.

Personally, I am very excited about the possibility of many more people creating True North Groups and having similar opportunities for intimacy, sharing, personal growth, and leadership development.

DOUG'S STORY

My introduction to groups was with athletic teams that lacked cohesiveness. As a college player and assistant coach, I saw our head coach bring a bunch of wildly independent athletes into a semblance of teamwork. Yet, with few exceptions, we were never close friends.

Then, as a young Army company commander, I watched my experienced first sergeant recruit a strong team of

noncommissioned officers that helped build our unit into an award-winning unit. Away from the job, few were close pals.

At the Pillsbury Company, I was introduced to early organizational and leadership development practices that stimulated me to pursue this line of work in my career. As a teacher, consultant, and corporate executive, I have worked to bring increased effectiveness to multiple organizations and people. Even so, few of these groups and teams had the intimacy and bonding to move beyond work relationships. I believed that a different and deeper relationship among team members would produce better results.

During these early years, Bill and I—along with two friends, Tom Schaefer and Gordy Lund—formed the men's group that continues to this day. As some of the original members moved away, we carefully introduced new members into the group. Today there are eight of us, all of whom have been part of the group for the past fifteen years.

As we matured and began to delve into more personal issues, the bonds deepened and grew richer. We experienced the joys and heartbreaks of life: loss of a child; death of a member; divorce; birth of children and grandchildren and their graduations and marriages; career successes and some failures; and health issues, both our own and in our families. We came to rely on the support of our members to help carry us through these challenges. Our bonding and intimacy, coupled with our joint search for answers to life's mysteries, proved the value of a closer, more entwined group.

For me personally, these men helped further shape my ethical boundaries. After leaving Pillsbury, I became a partner of a consulting group. After two years, we discovered one of the partners was having an extramarital affair with one of our contract trainers and was covering up some of her unprofessional training methods, one of which caused harm to my wife, Carole. My initial attempts to have this trainer removed were unsuccessful. I went to our group to ask if I was on a

valid course and they recommended that I should bring the matter to a head. Unable to force the resignation of the partner who was involved with the trainer, I left the firm.

Another time, the group pushed me to tackle a significant problem with my back rather than continuing alternative approaches. They also suggested the surgeon who helped me greatly.

Still later, the group helped me wrestle with an offer to take a senior position in New York City with American Express. After listening to my summary of the opportunity and the strong objections of my wife, the group unanimously advised me to turn the opportunity down. They felt I did not respond well to the stresses of big corporations and that my marriage was too important to ignore Carole's wishes. I followed their advice, took early retirement from corporate life at age 55, and have enjoyed coaching, writing, teaching, and traveling ever since.

The counsel and support I received are not unusual for friends to provide, but the variety of perspectives that improves the judgment of our group and its collective wisdom lends the power of numbers to the advice. Most helpful of all has been their feedback about my tendencies and style that often hindered my effectiveness as a leader. When I heard these things from these people who had my best interests at heart, it was impossible to ignore their suggestions.

About ten years ago, I decided I wanted to share the value of our group with others. Starting with the base of some clients of my coaching practice, I began to form groups using our True North Group model and the techniques we recommend in this book. My colleagues and I have started eight groups, with others currently in the formative stage. Some of their stories appear later in the book.

What impresses me about the True North Group process is the enormous benefit of examining our lives in great detail

and receiving encouragement to continue to grow and evolve. Our group provides solid, supportive feedback about how we come across to others. We have a chance to test our assumptions and beliefs and to make necessary changes as we learn more about ourselves, others, and the world. Over time, we expand our self-awareness into self-acceptance. In all of this, I have become a more effective leader in my groups, on the boards I serve, in my community, and in my family.

WHAT CAN A TRUE NORTH GROUP MEAN FOR YOU?

Having worked together in groups for thirty-six years, we have often talked about writing a book on small groups that could help others find the same joy, intimacy, and support we have in our groups. Those talks became the genesis of this book. We have written *True North Groups* to help you form such a group or revitalize your existing group.

Our research on groups and our personal interviews with fifty-two group members, described in Resource 12, gave us useful insights that we share in these pages. The quotes in the book come directly from those interviews. Building on this research and our personal experiences with groups, *True North Groups* describes how to build a successful group and what it can mean to you.

Ask yourself: Where do you go for advice and perspective when facing difficult decisions? Who can you count on to help you through the most challenging times? Who will be honest enough to point out your blind spots? Who would you talk to if you lost your job, your marriage were falling apart, or you faced a life-threatening illness?

Your True North Group can do all of these things—and more. It can help you sort out your values, your priorities, and your beliefs. It can give you insights about yourself that will

enhance your self-awareness and enable you to live authentically. And it can enable you to build deep, lasting friendships.

Your group can help you fill the void you may feel in your life by having people to talk to whom you can trust. In spite of being members of families, organizations where we work, communities where we live, and faith-based bodies where we worship, often there is no one we feel comfortable with in sharing the most important details of our lives. Unless we have people around us with whom we can be completely honest and open, it is surprising just how alone we can feel in our work, and even at home.

As a leader, being part of a True North Group provides you with constructive feedback on a regular basis from people who know you well. It offers a place to refine your authentic approach to leading and to sharpen your skills as a facilitator. As one interviewee observed, these groups are a place to get frequent, 360-degree feedback from people whose motives you trust completely.

THE BROADER NEED FOR PERSONAL GROUPS

In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, author Robert Putnam describes the demise of groups in contemporary society. He presents convincing evidence that the organizations our parents joined for camaraderie are in a stage of decline. Nor have they been replaced by newer organizations that fill our need for deeper relationships. Putnam writes, “Most Americans today feel vaguely and uncomfortably disconnected.”²

The irony is that we are surrounded by people—lots of them—all the time. These days it is actually hard to be by yourself. But we often feel alone in the midst of the turmoil, difficulties, and challenges of our everyday lives. The demise of group affiliations has left many of us feeling trapped in trying to navigate life’s challenges on our own. Yet we long

for opportunities to share who we are, our life stories, and the great questions we have about life.

Sociologists report that most of us have about 150 friends, people we see from time to time. Many of them are acquaintances, not close friends. Similarly, neighbors or people we work with on PTA committees probably aren't those with whom we would share an important decision in our lives. If we're honest with ourselves about how many intimate friends we have—those people with whom we would share our most personal dilemmas—we can count them on the fingers of one hand. When asked in 2004 by social researchers how many confidantes they had, 25 percent of Americans said they had none.

Our desire to be fiercely independent often keeps us from developing the close relationships we need to journey joyfully through life. In their 2008 book *Loneliness*, social neuroscientist John Cacioppo and co-author William Patrick suggest that “our society may have gone overboard in its emphasis on standing alone.” They assert,

We pay the price, not just in terms of our mental and physical health, but in terms of the strain on social cohesion . . . Independence is the rallying point for our culture . . . However, that swashbuckling independence could be better described as rootlessness . . . Feelings of social isolation deprive us of vast reservoirs of creativity and energy. Connection adds more water to the well that nourishes our human potential.³

There is a paradox in our individualism. We are spending more time than ever before in organizations where we work, yet the organizations in which we participate are ever larger and more impersonal. Few of the relationships formed in these organizations provide opportunities for depth, openness, authenticity, or personal development.

In response to these trends, many people have searched for ways to develop themselves individually. In recent decades, opportunities for personal development have proliferated, from the flourishing of yoga and Pilates courses, fitness centers, and adult education classes to individual therapy sessions. While these vehicles provide opportunities for personal development, they do not address the gnawing need we have for depth and intimacy in our interactions with others.

In working on our personal development, we often discover deep conflicts between our personal desires and the expectations of our organizations. Yet we don't know how to resolve these conflicts, nor do we have a safe place to discuss them. As a result, we feel a growing isolation within our organizations.

Navigating life's challenges on our own is risky. All of us have blind spots that prevent us from seeing ourselves as we are. Often we lack perspective on the questions we are facing. Left to ourselves, with no counsel or advice, we are prone to making bad decisions. Sometimes we cannot face our own reality. Instead of looking at ourselves in the mirror, we blame others for our difficulties. Without people we trust to point out our blind spots, we may be attempting to journey through life without recognizing our shortcomings or seeing ourselves as others see us.

Commenting on the importance of small groups, organization consultant Maureen Swan says, "The notion that you can develop yourself alone is false." She explains,

We need the intimacy of a small group and the feedback to create a mirror to reflect where we're at. When you try to do it alone, you don't have the opportunity for reflection that happens in a small group. You can look inside yourself in a different way because you have individuals around that you can learn from. It's so much different than a book club.

THE FACEBOOK PHENOMENON

To fill these gaps, Web-based social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn have exploded in membership in the past five years. Today, Facebook has over six hundred million registered users and was recently valued at \$50 billion, making it one of the most valuable companies in the world. Twitter has grown to more than two hundred fifty million users and is adding fifteen million new users every month. Many people assume this explosive growth is being driven by the millennial generation, yet the most rapidly growing demographic on Facebook today is people over forty.

Social media sites are an excellent way for us to reconnect with our old acquaintances and to meet new ones. They offer opportunities to link to lots of people, many of whom we have never met in person. Simply by pushing Enter on our computer keyboard, we can communicate with hundreds, even thousands of people in our extended network.

Bill is an active user of social media. He sends daily messages about contemporary leadership issues to a network of 10,000 people, which generates some interesting dialogues about these issues. But, for him, social media are certainly not a substitute for trusting relationships where he can discuss his most difficult challenges. Social media outlets cannot provide this level of intimacy, confidentiality, or opportunities for in-depth discussion, any more than the Lion's Club or a social group can.

TRUE NORTH GROUPS

This book is written with a dual purpose. The first is to demonstrate how rewarding it is to have a True North Group. You will learn about the inspiring stories of people who have participated in groups and what they got out of them. From our interviews with group members, we learned that most

people yearn for friendships and relationships with people they can trust and admire. They are eager to have a place where they can discuss their issues, their hopes, and their dreams. They hunger for that kind of intimacy but don't know where to find it.

The second purpose is to provide you with a manual that guides the formation of your True North Group. The book will help you organize your group to ensure its success, and includes a complete set of programs for the first year and many program ideas beyond the start-up phase.

In these pages we will attempt to answer questions like these:

- How can a True North Group help you steer between your personal life and the larger world you confront every day?
- How can your group help you develop as a person and become a more effective leader?
- What is required for your group to be fulfilling and rewarding for everyone in it?
- What processes are needed to keep your group alive and vital?
- Why are some groups successful, while others fall apart?
- How can you deal with the inevitable interpersonal difficulties that will confront your group?

THE STAGES OF A GROUP'S LIFE

True North Groups is organized around a familiar sequence that is common to groups: *forming*, *norming*, *storming*, *performing*, and *reforming*. This progression for group development was originally developed by Bruce Tuckman in 1965.⁴ For our purposes, we change Tuckman's sequence because

we prefer to address norming before storming, as the former is a way to prevent the latter. We have added the fifth stage, reforming.

Chapter 1 offers a complete introduction to True North Groups and how they can work for you. In Chapter 2, we examine the vital role True North Groups can play in your personal and leadership development. Then we move to the first stage, *forming*, which encompasses all the elements you need to create a True North Group, along with suggestions to ensure the building of a sound foundation for your group.

Perhaps the least obvious of the stages, *norming* is the creation of habits, practices, and rules characterizing your group's behavior and the ways in which your group members interact. Although people can describe the group's tangible norms, the more subtle—and often more important—norms may be less apparent and can escape observation except by a trained observer.

The *storming* phase describes the disagreements that your members may have with each other individually and often with the group as a whole. Storms can be well concealed for some time and then break out as highly visible and verbal disputes. In many ways, storms within your group may be inevitable if you have people who are passionate about life and the topics being discussed. It is the effective handling of these episodes that will determine your group's longevity and the long-term satisfaction of your members.

Performing covers the period when your group is operating productively. This is the groove that every group seeks to achieve. In discussing this phase, we suggest programs for the first year of a group's existence that will give the group both depth and substance and provide the basis for intimate discussions.

The final stage, *reforming*, usually comes later in a group's life, when the group needs to reshape itself in order to provide ongoing satisfaction for its members, and sustainability.

In the event the members decide that reforming is not possible, we provide suggestions for disbanding the group gracefully.

We describe these stages as if each is a separate and distinct set of activities. Although this linear approach helps clarify them, the stages do not always fit neatly in this order. It is not unusual, for example, to have some early storming while membership issues are being hashed out. The same can occur while trying to set norms for the new group, especially if attendance standards are used. Norming starts early in formation, with consideration of the group's purpose and decisions about the members to include. Reforming occurs whenever new members are invited to join the group or existing members leave.

The Resources section offers a manual of the tools needed to develop the group, including a curriculum with the first twelve recommended topics and an additional thirty-five ideas for dynamic programs.

We hope you will form or create a True North Group and learn how it can transform your life and enable you to be more fulfilled.



True North Groups

IN THE INTRODUCTION, WE EXAMINED THE BENEFITS of having a small, intimate group in our lives to support us during challenging times and enable us to live lives of joy and fulfillment. Let's begin by focusing on what True North Groups are and how they work.

TRUE NORTH GROUPS

What is a True North Group? It consists of six to eight people who meet on a regular basis to share their personal challenges and discuss important questions in their lives. At various times your True North Group will function as a nurturer, a grounding rod, a truth teller, and a mirror. At other times the group functions as a challenger or an inspirer. At their best, the members of your group serve each other as caring coaches and thoughtful mentors.

Your True North Group is characterized by high levels of trust between your members, something that may be hard to find at work or even in your community. When you feel self-doubts, your group helps build the courage and ability to cope. The trust of your group enables all members to be open and intimate, building on your shared commitment to maintain strict confidentiality.

Your group will stimulate your beliefs about the important issues of life and help you think through the challenges you face. Group members will give you constructive feedback when you need it most. Most importantly, your group is a safe haven when you are facing difficult times and experiencing stress and distress—something all of us encounter from time to time.

OUR TRUE NORTH GROUP

To get a better understanding of what a True North Group is and how it operates, let's take an in-depth look at the group we formed in the spring of 1975. The eight of us had participated in a retreat weekend and were searching for ways to continue the openness, sharing, and intimacy we had experienced.

We decided to meet weekly in the living room of a neighborhood church on Wednesday mornings from 7:15 to 8:30 a.m. Thirty-six years later, the group meets every Wednesday in that same place. Three members of our original group are still active and the others have joined us over the years. One of our members died, another got divorced and moved away, and the others were transferred out of town.

Our current group includes two lawyers, five businessmen, and an architect. Each person brings to the group a unique perspective on life, on beliefs, and on human nature. In spite of significant differences in our faiths and beliefs, we have a common commitment to sharing our lives openly, respecting our differences, and discussing the challenges and difficulties we face.

The Group's Importance to Our Members

What's the glue that has kept the group together all these years? Group member Peter Gillette, former president of a

large bank, says, “It’s one of those mysterious combinations of the people, setting, experiences, mutual respect, and humor.”

The flexibility of our topics makes it conducive for all elements of personality and articulation to thrive. There is a bonding, camaraderie, and trust. It’s the differences between us that provide the spark that makes the conversation so stimulating.

Business executive Tom Schaefer explains, “Our group has become the most important community in my life, other than my immediate family.” He adds,

It’s a community of seven brothers that has helped guide my life in terms of spiritual formation, work, and personal growth. It continually challenges my beliefs about life, values, and spirit. It provides a safe place where I can examine these issues, reflect on them, and understand what others feel about such important matters. These guys operate as my special board of advisors, as they provide a lot of life coaching.

Our group was so important that there were times I left my job in part to stay with the group rather than move out of town. I knew I couldn’t duplicate it somewhere else and didn’t want to give it up. I’ve always wanted to feel proud of my work and my actions in front of my pals, so I ask myself how the group would react about something I’m considering. It provides a moral compass, a way of checking on my sense of what’s right and wrong.

The Group’s Process

As we gather each week, we have a brief check-in to enable people to bring up anything significant in their lives. Then

one of us initiates discussion of the program. Responsibility for leading the program is rotated every two weeks, so each of us takes the lead about six times a year.

Although many groups may choose to hire their own professional facilitator to prepare programs and lead discussions, our group prefers having our members take responsibility for facilitating, to ensure everyone feels equal responsibility for the group. (See Resource 7 for a complete discussion of facilitator options.) Attorney Ron Vantine explains, “We decided not to have an expert or a full-time facilitator because we didn’t want to look to an expert for the answers. Instead, we wanted to come up with questions that were crucial to us.”

On a regular basis, we take a check to be sure that everyone in the group is feeling satisfied and fulfilled. Periodically, we ask ourselves, How are we doing? Are we getting out of our heads and into our hearts and souls? Each of us does that to varying degrees. Some of us are better at asking questions and guiding the conversation; others excel at giving small seminars.

Addressing Life’s Most Important Questions

Our group provides opportunities to challenge our views and grow from the questions. Chuck Denny, former CEO of a large telecommunications company, highlights the importance of deep discussions: “We talk about our values and where they come from.” He asks,

What has been their importance in our lives? Have they been tested? Do we stay true to them under stress? It’s introspective, not just intellectual. What are we doing to make society better? How do we allocate time between ourselves, our family, and society? These discussions have helped me create the road map for each phase of my life.

Architect John Cuningham says, “At some point in their lives everybody asks the big questions like Why am I here? What is life all about? What is my purpose?” He says,

Our group has grappled with these questions through happy and sad experiences. There is no judgment and no critical analysis of our beliefs. We have struggled with them in our personal spiritual journeys, as we move in and out of doubt about what we believe. The questions never seem to change, but the answers are different when you’re 69 than when you’re 39.

Opening Up and Sharing Intimately

Over the years, we have built relationships of trust and intimacy. Vantine notes, “The group enriches my life and my understanding of what I want out of life and what I can contribute. The discussions make me feel my values are worthy because they are shared by other men I admire and respect.” He explains,

These conversations are much different than ones with social friends, colleagues at work, or even family members. I know only a couple of men where I can get to such a level of depth. With us, it happens every week. That’s because we have the trust, environment, and relationships that have built up over all these years. The group has a unique place in my life.

There is never a clash of egos in our group. None of us feel we have to prove anything to the rest of the group. If that happened, the person would be called on it. None of us is trying to impress the others with our titles, power, and influence, or suggest that we have all the answers. We all have more questions than answers.

It wasn't always this way. It took a number of years to let go of our egos and to be willing to share our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Typically, we find that it takes men longer than women to break through their defenses to become more reflective and less defensive.

Vantine adds, "There are few places in life where I have a chance to talk about significant issues, particularly things that are personal. It's unusual to get into those topics in an environment where everyone feels secure, has a high level of trust, and wants to learn from each other."

What are the benefits of this level of intimacy and openness? St. Paul attorney Jonathan Morgan says, "The group provides a venue for discussing existential questions and life's mysteries that stretches the mind almost to the breaking point."

We share our challenges, obstacles, joys, and times of sadness. We're there to help and support each other and offer prayers and benedictions for each other. The collegiality and trust that have developed give the group sustaining power.

Tom Schaefer observes, "Learning I could ask for help was a huge leap for me."

A big part of my growth has been learning I don't have to have all the answers and can't figure it all out by myself. I found out everybody needs help at various times. Learning to be vulnerable in this group has enabled me to be vulnerable elsewhere.

Experiencing Life's Challenges

Longevity also has its rewards. Together we have shared our life stories, both when we met and as we experience life's challenges. Collectively, our lives are enriched by sharing

the full range of life's joys and sorrows. From the combined experiences of people who have been through all these things has developed a collective wisdom in our group. This results from trusting relationships and the acceptance of each person for who he is.

Chuck Denny described the group's importance to his coping with his wife, Carol's, descent into the darkness of Alzheimer's disease. "The group gave me incredible support in those years when I was caring for Carol at home."

I could acknowledge to the group just how difficult and tiring this was and what it was like to feel socially isolated. Being together each week enabled me to banter with humor with a group of trusted friends. It provided a social contribution that filled a void in my life because I couldn't go out. Wednesday mornings are a sacred time, not in a spiritual sense but in finding nourishment, support, acceptance, and an hour of fun.

Tom Schaefer described how the group helped him face a difficult ethical challenge. "As chief financial officer for a manufacturing business, I discovered we were repackaging returned goods and selling them as new."

I told the group I felt this was an ethical crossroads for me, and they affirmed my concerns. As a result, I told the owner I couldn't live with this practice. He agreed, and we ended up stopping the repackaging.

Reflections on the Group

We frequently ask ourselves, Is there something unique about the eight of us that makes this group work so well and stay together for so many years? We don't think we are different than any eight people who genuinely want to explore

together the important questions of their lives. What is crucial is the willingness of each of us to share openly, join in the give-and-take of a peer group, and listen in a nonjudgmental way to the challenges others face.

THE EMERGENCE OF SMALL GROUPS

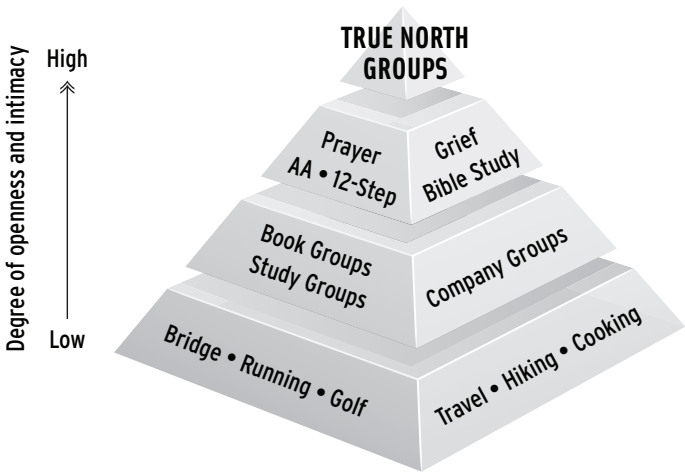
Small groups are certainly not a new phenomenon. We learned through our field research that participation in small groups is gaining strength. These groups arise both formally and informally and have many different purposes. Most people have participated in one kind of group or another.

In doing the research for this book (see Resource 12), we examined many of these groups to understand how they operate and what makes them successful. Examples of the types of groups we explored include:

- Book and study groups
- Prayer groups, Bible study, and other religious groups
- Alcoholics Anonymous groups
- Twelve-step groups that focus on other addictions
- Cooking groups, bridge groups, and wine tasting groups
- Therapy groups, grief groups, and other support groups
- The Forum of the Young Presidents' Organization
- Small groups within companies
- Travel groups
- Biking, walking, running, and golf groups

These groups are affinity groups whose members come together around a common set of interests or a common concern such as chemical dependency, life-threatening illness, or loss of loved ones. Those interests and concerns provide the focal point for the group's programs or meetings. Typically,

EXHIBIT 1

Openness and Intimacy of Groups

the members take turns leading their groups, whether by proposing menus for a cooking group, studying biblical passages for a Bible study group, or planning routes for a biking trip.

One way of categorizing small groups is by their degree of openness and intimacy. At the base of the pyramid are travel, running, cooking, or bridge groups, and so forth (see Exhibit 1). People in these groups come together for an activity rather than for personal sharing. To the extent that there are personal discussions, it is independent of or incidental to the group's activities. At the next level are book groups, study groups, and company groups that have intellectual discussions that occasionally delve into personal matters, depending on the topic of the group.

On the third level are Bible study groups, prayer groups,

grief groups, therapy groups, Alcoholics Anonymous, and twelve-step groups that are affiliated around a particular purpose and share deeply about that area, including discussions of personal feelings, convictions, and beliefs. Many prayer groups and Bible study groups offer their members opportunities for examination of their religious beliefs and provide strong bonding around shared values.

True North Groups, as described in this book, provide a forum for deep, intimate discussions of all aspects of one's life, not only matters of belief and faith. These may include personal issues, such as family problems, leadership and career concerns, or healthy living, as well as convictions about a wide spectrum of subjects. They are fairly unique in providing a safe place for confidential discussions of highly personal subjects across the full range of life's issues, but without any particular affinity.

THE CELLULAR CHURCH

Before exploring True North Groups, it may be useful to look more closely at one kind of upper-tier organization that is growing rapidly—megachurches like Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, the largest in the United States. In 2005 Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, wrote a widely read article for *The New Yorker* called "The Cellular Church." In the article, he compared small groups in megachurches like Saddleback to cells in a larger organism. Gladwell describes how Warren created "a church out of a network of lots of little church cells—exclusive, tightly knit groups of six or seven who meet in one another's homes during the week to worship and pray." He writes,

The small group as an instrument of community is initially how Communism spread, and in the postwar

years Alcoholics Anonymous and its twelve-step progeny perfected the small-group technique. The small group did not have a designated leader who stood at the front of the room. Members sat in a circle. The focus was on discussion and interaction—not one person teaching and the others listening—and the remarkable thing about these groups was their power. An alcoholic could lose his job and his family, he could be hospitalized, he could be warned by half a dozen doctors—and go on drinking. But put him in a room of his peers once a week—make him share the burdens of others and have his burdens shared by others—and he could do something that once seemed impossible.⁵

Gladwell explains that megachurches adopted the cellular model because they found that “the small group was an extraordinary vehicle of commitment.” He writes,

It was personal and flexible. It cost nothing. It was convenient, and every worshipper was able to find a small group that precisely matched his or her interests. Today, at least forty million Americans are in a religiously based small group, and the growing ranks of small-group membership have caused a profound shift in the nature of the American religious experience.

Intrigued by the rapid expansion of the membership of these churches, Bill visited Willow Creek in a Chicago suburb in 2008 to meet with Pastor Bill Hybels. Mystified about how people could feel at home with 22,000 people attending weekly worship services, Bill was told, “We are a community of small groups who meet weekly to discuss the Bible and its impact on our lives, and then we all worship together on weekends.”⁶

WHY TRUE NORTH GROUPS ARE DIFFERENT

True North Groups are not built around affinity models that provide the glue that brings them together and gives their members opportunities for sharing common interests. Our research confirmed that no prior bond is required for a True North Group; in fact, a diverse set of strangers is just as effective as preexisting affinity among members. They often have no particular connection except the longing for affiliation, openness, and commitment to personal growth and leadership development.

In offering opportunities for deep discussions about challenges people face, True North Groups provide a safe place where members can discuss personal issues they do not feel they can raise elsewhere—often not even with their closest family members—and can explore questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

For example, one group member told us he had shared with his colleagues his agony about whether to separate from his wife. He said the group helped him recognize his dissatisfaction resulted more from his issues than his wife's. After months of discussions with his group and assistance from a professional counselor, he and his wife are back together and seem satisfied with their relationship.

After working closely with dozens of groups, participating in several groups ourselves, and researching the small group phenomenon, we conclude that True North Groups are one of the best opportunities individuals have to grow as human beings and leaders and to develop their full potential.

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by Bill George, Doug Baker

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