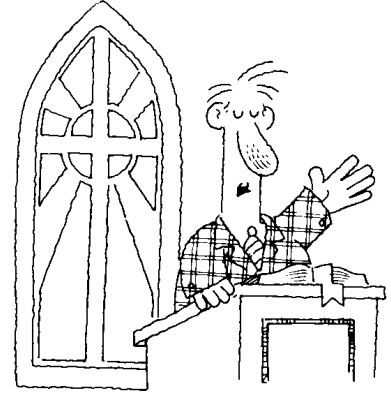


The influential leader

By Nina Thiel
InterVarsity® area director in CA

Stan cornered me at an InterVarsity® camp one night after my sophomore year and really let me have it. Stan and I had been in a small group and on our leadership team together all year. He was a little older than I, but he always spent extra time talking to me. He often visited me in my sorority, bringing me books and articles he thought would help me grow. He was also one of the few in our fellowship who wasn't fooled by my "together" appearance. Stan knew that I was actually living quite a double life as a leader. I was seeing a less-than-committed-to-Christ boyfriend, and I had recently missed a leadership meeting because I had a hangover. Stan lovingly, but firmly, pointed out those issues in my life which were keeping me from following Jesus wholeheartedly. He would not let me wander away. I haven't been the same since that night fifteen years ago. How I appreciated someone loving me enough to risk challenging me! As a leader, Stan was a good shepherd. And there are others I know.



Carolyn was a junior at UCLA. She and others from her InterVarsity® fellowship moved into the residence halls in order to live out the gospel among fellow students, loving them as Jesus would.

Carolyn began a Bible study in her hall and soon met a new student named Jenny. Jenny didn't know Jesus and came sporadically to the Bible study, but Carolyn was impressed by her good questions about Christianity and her eagerness to get answers. Carolyn also found that she really enjoyed Jenny's personality, and she began to hang out with her.

When Jenny wanted to sing and dance down the hallway on the way to dinner, Carolyn did it too! When Jenny wanted to go to aerobics at 6:00 a.m., Carolyn went with her. They visited each other's homes on weekends, and Jenny accompanied Carolyn not only to Bible study, but also to large group meetings and conferences. Carolyn shared her time with Jenny -- and her life too. Sometime during that fall, Jenny decided she wanted to follow Jesus and became a committed member of Carolyn's Bible study.

Now Jenny is herself a junior leading a Bible study in a residence hall at UCLA. She is investing her life in relationships with new students. She continues to grow closer to Jesus and to bring others with her.

There is more to leading a chapter or a small-group Bible study than planning for a weekly time slot. In fact, the brief meetings we plan could better be thought of as a rallying point for all that goes on during the week! In committing ourselves to be leaders, we have pledged to invest our time and our very

lives in a group of people. Our goal is to influence them intentionally toward a closer relationship with Jesus and a life of following him.

Influencers in the Bible

The Bible is filled with examples of influencing relationships. Eli apprenticed Samuel. Ruth dedicated herself to Naomi. David and Jonathan remained committed friends amid hostile circumstances. Elijah passed the mantle of leadership and prophecy to Elisha. Elizabeth cared for her pregnant cousin, Mary. Jesus, our primary model of investing in others for the sake of the kingdom, poured three years of his life into a diverse band of followers, giving special attention to three loud-mouthed fishermen (Peter, James and John), a rather emotional female (Mary of Bethany) and her over-responsible sister (Martha).

One of the most famous influencing relationships is the one between the Apostle Paul and his young partner-in-ministry, Timothy. Paul's farewell letter to this friend (2 Timothy) reveals the characteristics of their relationship that God used to help Timothy grow.

Close Relationship

First, Paul relates closely to Timothy. He thanks God for him (1:3). Paul remembers Timothy in his prayers night and day (1:3). He longs to see him so he may be filled with joy (1:5). He knows Timothy's family and his spiritual history well. It's obvious that Paul loves Timothy because he wants so much for him. We dare not think of our small-group members and others in the fellowship as projects to work on nor our influencing them as a program to put them through. God's mode of operation throughout history has been to influence people through close relationships, not through treating them as ministry projects.

Relationships like these will cost time and emotional energy. Several years ago, I inadvertently hurt the feelings of a student I was discipling. She wrote me a card, expressing her hurt and anger. I first read her card to myself while sitting in a meeting with other staff workers. A colleague told me later how he watched my face fall and saw how distracted I became. I could not rest until I had reconciled with my friend. Her feelings mattered to me -- because she mattered to me. It was the kind of relationship through which God could (and did) work.

Challenge Toward Growth

A second key to Paul's influence is that he challenges Timothy. Paul directs several hits on Timothy's weak spots in 2 Timothy 1-2. Paul challenges him to rekindle the gift God has given him (1:6). He calls him not to be ashamed of Paul and not to shrink from suffering for the gospel (1:8). Paul exhorts Timothy to keep the pattern of sound teaching he's heard from Paul: to guard the gospel entrusted to him (1:13-14). He challenges Timothy to be strong in Christ's grace, passing on the teaching he's learned to people who will "teach

Helping Others Grow

Nina Thiel

What can you do to serve fellow students as an influencer? The place to start is right where they are in their Christian life. Ask yourself some questions to help you determine their growing edges: How could they be more like Jesus and follow him more closely? How well do they know the basics of Christian beliefs and the disciplines of prayer and personal Bible study? Are they learning how to share Jesus with those around them in a way that fits their personality? How about lifestyle issues? Are they struggling with sexual purity or substance abuse? Are they maturing in relationships with others? Your answers to these kinds of questions will help you get ideas for areas to focus on in your time with your friends.

Deciding Direction Together

Assuming that your friend is open to an intentional, mutual growth relationship, you can decide together what you'd like to do, especially if it involves some kind of structure, such as study or reading. Usually, younger students or newer Christians benefit from study and help in areas such as lifestyle issues, Bible study skills, prayer, and understanding Jesus and Christianity better. With older students or more mature ones, you can work on quite a variety of things, such as the theology of prayer, how to respond to tough questions, issues of self-esteem, Christian simplicity, vocational stewardship and so forth. Part of being a good friend is being open to doing anything that would be helpful! Leaders who want to influence others should remember the three key areas of close relationship, challenge and modeling. Here are some ideas that will give you a feel for what an influencing relationship might look like:

To build relationships:

Go to breakfast, lunch or dinner together. Tell each other about your day. Pray for each other together. Go to movies together. Visit each other's homes. Go grocery-shopping together. Study together. Take a road trip. Write encouraging notes to each other. Take risks with each other: share your stuff; listen well; be yourself. Take part in each other's interests and activities. Agree to try something that the other person likes to do, and try to be there for them at performances, presentations and parties.

To provide challenge:

Read a book together. Study the Bible together. Apply the Scriptures together. Help each other discover and use your spiritual gifts. Co-lead your Bible study. Show how to invest in younger Christians. Again, pray for each other. Confront as necessary, but remember to encourage a lot. Affirm each other whenever you get the chance. Make use of resources within your fellowship such as large-group meetings, discipleship conferences, camps, ministry experiences, staff and older students. Make use of resources outside your fellowship such as pastors, church ministries, Christian counselors and recovery groups.

To be a good model:

Make it a point to share personal struggles and concerns. Don't hesitate to ask for prayer. Finally, make sure you're growing as a leader yourself. Be sure to put yourself into relationships of accountability and challenge for your own growth. The best way to be like Jesus in your relationships is to be close to him -- and to keep developing your own responsiveness to him.

others also" (2:1-2). Paul reminds him to endure hardship (2:3), to reflect on these challenges (2:7) and to remember Jesus' example in all of it (2:8).

Some Christians are reluctant to challenge others toward growth and obedience. This nursery rhyme, rather than the words of Scripture, seems to be their guide:

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep
And doesn't know where to find them.
Leave them alone, and they'll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them.

Yeah, right. We all know that sheep are too dumb to make sensible decisions on their own. And we're a lot like sheep, wandering off and getting into all kinds of trouble. Like sheep, we need shepherds, too. But when it comes to going after a "sheep" who's wandering away, scaling a cliff to retrieve one, carrying one back firmly and decisively, or actually using that hooked staff, we shy away. Some of the harshest words I've read in the Bible are God's words to the false "shepherds of Israel" in Ezekiel 34. They are not doing what it takes to care for God's flock; they are only thinking of themselves, and the sheep are being scattered and eaten by wild animals.

When Stan confronted me that night at camp, he was being a good shepherd. His challenging me was hard for him, but it changed my life. Where would I be now if he hadn't taken the risk? We all have an amazing effect on people around us, whether we're planning to or not -- sometimes for good, other times, not. But those who are in the relationships I'm describing aren't willing to leave it at that. Influencing others toward growth is intentional. When we're truly seeking to invest in someone, we must be thinking about how to love them, serve them, encourage them and help them grow. I'm not advocating a rigid, inflexible, six-week, fill-in-the-blanks-and-voila!-you're-disciplined plan. I'm advocating thoughtful and prayerful planning for another's growth. To be intentional is to be a good steward of the relationships God has given us.

A Good Example

Finally, Paul sets an example for Timothy. Paul understands the suffering he calls Timothy to because he has endured it himself. He writes to Timothy from a Roman prison as he faces death at the hand of Caesar. He knows how it feels to be rejected (1:15). He shares his honest trust that God will help him guard the gospel (1:12). Paul has not shrunk from living out the very life calling he wants Timothy to adopt.

The life and ministry of Jesus also shows how this works. All the healings his disciples witnessed, all the sermons they listened to and all the tender conversations they overheard taught them by example how to love others. They watched while Jesus showed them how to do it -- and next thing they knew, he was asking them to do it too! How many lessons

Whom Should I Invest In?

Nina Thiel

After you've read the main article, spend some time reflecting on these questions. They make good group discussion as well.

1. Think of a few people who have helped you know Jesus better and be more like him. How did they do it? What did you learn from them? What can you imitate from their example as influencers?
2. Of the three components of influence -- relating closely, challenging and modeling -- which is your strength? your weakest area? What will help you grow as an influencer?
3. Who are the "faithful people" (2 Timothy 2:2) in your group? What do you think their "growing edges" are? Which ones will you invest in (see the sidebar on page 3)? How will you get started?
4. Who in your life is currently influencing you and helping you grow? Who can you ask to spend time with you?
5. How can your fellowship's organizational structures be used to ensure that people throughout your chapter and small-group networks are being cared for and helped to grow?

came from incidents on their way somewhere or in conversations late at night or early in the morning? Because the disciples were always with Jesus, he could model everything for them. And because the disciples got to see what it looked like, they knew what to do.

The wonderful relationship between Jenny and Carolyn described earlier shows the power of modeling. Carolyn was simply herself, and brought Jenny along. Jenny had the chance to see a devoted Christian live out her faith daily and in a variety of circumstances, complete with all the ups and downs.

When Carolyn spent time writing Jenny notes, when Carolyn jumped in to clean up the mess of a drunk and vomiting hallmate, and when Jenny and Carolyn spent the evening vacuuming the rooms of their neighbors "just because," Carolyn showed Jenny that being a Christian is serving, loving and extending yourself for people.

I'm sure Carolyn was even a bad example at times, but Jesus used that, too, to show Jenny the nitty-gritties of following Jesus -- repenting, making choices and being changed by him. Speaking about Carolyn, Jenny says, "Her life was the gospel." When she had her own chance to clean up the mess of a drunk and vomiting hallmate last spring, she thought of Carolyn's example and immediately reached for a sponge.

Worth The Effort?

This kind of intentional, influential leadership is costly. Relationships take time. Challenging takes emotional energy and thought. Modeling requires willingness to lay out our lives for others to see. We might be rejected or misunderstood. We might be disappointed with the results of our investment of time and energy. And it might hurt our grades, our personal plans or our feelings if we commit ourselves to another's growth and begin to invest in them.

Is it worth the price? When I make a mental list of those I consider to be treasured friends, I realize that most of those friendships began in my small group or on a team I worked with. They were the people I believed God wanted me to invest in more deeply. And as we spent all those hours together, they became not only my friends, but influencers, too. What a joy to see people not only grow closer to Jesus, but also to watch them bring others to him! What a thrill to be part of the lives of those who are deepening their relationship with God and ministering to others. It helps me grow too.

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Can one leader do it all?

Nina Thiel

Most leaders are strong in one or two of the three elements of influence I've described in the main article and weak in the others. Some are strong in relating and modeling, but weak on challenging. Others are strong in modeling and challenging, but weak in relating, and so forth. We need the challenge and support of our co-leaders, staff workers and peers to take risks in our weak areas.

How does this work? Here's an example: Rhonda, a small-group leader at UNLV, was facing a problem. She had been spending time with Mandy, a new student and member of her small group. They had become good friends, and Rhonda was excited to see Mandy growing in her faith. Then Mandy told Rhonda she was starting to date a non-believer. Rhonda herself had been down that road before, and she knew she should talk to Mandy about it. But Rhonda was afraid to confront her.

Determined to be a faithful shepherd, Rhonda asked for prayer and accountability from the other small-group leaders. Several of us met to pray for their conversation while they were meeting to talk. Rhonda reported back that their time went well. Mandy was actually glad that Rhonda brought up the relationship, because she wanted to do the right thing. Rhonda knew she needed help to be a good influencer and she got it!

No leader can have close relationships with every person in his or her group. Your role as a leader is to make sure that people are developing relationships with others who can help them grow -- not to do it all yourself! Turn to co-leaders, older members of the group or staff. Encourage small-group members to spend intentional time with each other outside the normal weekly meeting. They can pray for each other, read books together, listen to each other or just have fun. The one-on-ones you set up each week can turn into powerful tools of God for mutual growth and encouragement.