

Exponential Impact: Mentoring as a Way of Life

With Steve Nicholson

Steve Nicholson has been the pastor at the Evanston Vineyard for 27 years, is on the National Board of AVC USA, and oversees church planting nationally for the Vineyard. He is often seen speaking at various Vineyard conferences and leadership forums. But what people most often comment about when they see Steve at such functions is the consistent “posse” of young leaders he has with him wherever he goes. He seems to not travel without three or four in tow. In addition, there are church planters, missionaries, and ministry leaders all over the world who have, at one point or another, been mentored and trained by Steve. The Evanston Vineyard has, alone, planted over 16 churches in the last few years. Frequently, Steve is asked, “How do you do it? How do you train and mentor so many people? What’s your approach?”

We asked him to answer those questions here.

Over the last twenty years at the Evanston Vineyard, I’ve been trying to raise up as many pastors, missionaries and church planters as I possibly can, and I have found that mentoring is a good way to do that. Mentoring, for me, is not a program; it is a relationship. My whole approach has been to get into relationship, get to know the person I am mentoring, discover as much about them as I possibly can, and at the same time give myself to them and let that have its impact.

Because it’s very relational, when people say, “Give me your mentoring program,” it’s very difficult to do! You can’t boil a relationship down that way. It is a little bit different every time, because it’s impacted by the dynamics of the relationship.

Factors in Success

I think there’s a number of reasons that we’ve been successful at raising up leaders here. A big factor, I think, has been the church itself. This church has become a very healthy, safe church if you want to grow as a leader. It’s an environment where mistakes are not the worst thing that can happen. We don’t have a culture that’s big on control; experimentation is valued highly, and in some ways “laissez-faire” is more the norm. That appeals to a lot of growing leaders. (That said, a potential leader who has a high need for structure might find us a little frustrating.) Because we are a very urban church we have a high turnover, so there is always space for more leaders. It’s not a place where all the spots have been filled up long ago. Because we are committed to church planting, we are always sending leaders out with a need for more. Also, the people who *are* here long-term have come to appreciate the fact that we are a training church of sorts, and that it is all right to have so many people coming and going. They are very accepting of new leaders.

A final big factor is simply that I spend a lot of time training and investing in leaders, and they consistently have gone out and been a blessing to the wider church. So that we have a good reputation as a place to learn and grow. Now people come here specifically because of what they can get at Evanston.

Where It Started

This focus on developing others began back when I was in college. I read a book by Robert Coleman called *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, which is actually something of a misnomer; the book is more about discipleship and mentoring. I read that book and I decided then and there that I was going to *do* what it said. The main premise of the book is that Jesus went about trying to change the world by investing in a few people who could turn around and do it again. It is about relying on the power of exponential multiplication rather than on addition. The premise of the book is that you can actually get more done by

significantly impacting a small number of people who are trained to turn around and do it again, than in a more superficial way by trying to impact a larger number of people. So, for the past thirty years, I have always been looking for, thinking about, and working at training leaders behind me.

Circles of Relationships

People always ask how many people I work with at a time. The answer is that I am always working with concentric circles of relationships. At any given time, I work with a large number of people, but at different levels of intensity. At the outer edges would be some people that I think might have potential to become more deliberate mentorees sometime in the future—but not yet. They aren't ready. I'm watching them, maintaining a little relationship with them, paying some attention to them from time to time, and just waiting. Then there are some people I do a little more with, more of an inner circle. Maybe they are starting to lead. Then there is a very small number of people—two or three—who are getting ready to go out to plant or pastor or head to the mission field. Those relationships are very intentional, very intense. So there is a constant flow of people within my purview that I'm watching out for. This year I have one "official" intern—but around fifty people somewhere in those concentric circles.

Once I start spending time with somebody, I begin with a kind of assessment. I want to know: who is this person? What is their call from God? What are their gifts? Where are they going? Where are they meant to be? What do they have already that they need, and what are they missing right now? I get it by just talking. It may not be all in one conversation; it may take several. It's important that I never assume the exact dimensions of where they are headed. It's always a matter of discovering where they are meant to be and what they are meant to become. My job is to help them get there.

I am not trying to impose something from the outside. Fundamentally, I don't want someone to go off to work at something because "Steve" wanted them to. That'll never get them through the hard times, and they will blame me for it! I want them to know that they are doing it because *they* chose it, because they feel *God* is calling them to it.

Getting New Experiences

Next, I want to push them in the areas in which their not as experienced or comfortable, but that they'll need down the road. So, for example, if a guy comes and feels called to become a senior pastor, and he's done a whole lot of public speaking and is fairly strong in that, I'm probably not going to do much to develop him in that arena. But he might be weak in dealing with people one-on-one in counseling situations, so I will throw him into that. I am looking for things where they will grow, where they will be a little bit afraid, where they will be challenged. I'll send them to different parts of the church: "Go help this person with that ministry." I like to have them lead a small group, and I tell them, "I want you to lead this group long enough to have trouble, long enough for somebody to criticize you, to have a messy pastoral problem." My feeling is that until those things happen, you don't really start learning. When those difficulties start to come, however, the intern and I have plenty to talk about!

I am always trying to keep a person's experience *ahead* of their education. You learn a lot more on a "felt need" basis. Sometimes I'll push them into certain things that they are not sure lie within their gifts. They regularly experience me getting them into situations they are nervous about. I typically pray for them to have trouble during the mentoring time. They look at me funny when I tell them that, but from my point of view that's when we get to deal with real stuff. I do everything I can think of to stretch them and challenge them in the direction in which they are meant to be going.

Ongoing Opportunities

I include interns in everything I do—from weekly staff meetings to accompanying me on as many of my ministry trips as possible. I often will have them sit with me during meetings with other leaders or in counseling situations here at home. They get to sit and watch and see how I react, and what I say to people.

If I'm meeting with other pastors, they get to hear all that. These days, a lot of times I am talking with pastors about different problems their church is having, wondering what to do about a certain situation. I love for those I'm mentoring to hear all of that.

I meet with my interns once a week when I am in town, and when we are traveling they will generally be in the same hotel room with me, so we have lots of time to talk. Inevitably we talk about everything—their personal life, their marriage, their dating life if they're single. Hardly ever do we end up talking only about ministry. Because it is very relational, it feels enough like a friendship that it's natural to open up about every issue. It never feels formal.

When I start twenty-five years ago, my experience was more limited and my opportunities were more limited. Back then, I didn't do much traveling, speaking, or consulting. Now I do a lot of that, and it's easy to drag interns along with me so they learn quite a lot from it. Not infrequently in those situations, my mentorees come out with their heads reeling because so much information has come flying past them. These days, I'm a lot clearer—and therefore more intentional—about what I'm doing and what I'm trying to end up with. I'm also a little more ruthless in challenging and stretching them than I was twenty-five years ago. Back then, if they were in a situation where they were sweating, I might have wanted to soothe them, or make things more comfortable. Now I want to make them *more* uncomfortable—because while I'm doing it, I'm behind them the whole time, saying, "You can do it, I believe in you." There has got to be a strong sense of belief, acceptance and encouragement behind all the fear. I'm better at that now, too. When I was younger I didn't realize how important it was to people that their authority figures believed in them.

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