

Recruiting from a Three-Legged Stool

BY LARRY FOWLER

“Thanks! I deeply appreciate that. That’s really nice. Thanks.” Eric looked me right in the eyes as he said it. His face showed me he really meant his words.

This young Hispanic man from South Los Angeles sat next to me on a plane this past weekend. As the trip started, we got acquainted. He was on his way to boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center near Chicago. He told me it was his first trip outside of California and his first plane ride.

I asked, “Are you nervous?” “Very!” was his transparent answer. “More than that—scared.” We ended up having a pleasant, extended conversation about the world, travel, family and spiritual issues (he was a believer) before we each got in a good nap on the flight.

As we descended into Chicago, I handed him a slip of paper. I had written my email address and phone number on it. “Eric, since you said you don’t know anyone else here, I want you to have this. If you ever need a friend or somewhere to go on a day off, let me know. I’d be honored to take you.”

It was that simple show of friendship that caused Eric’s positive response. He, like nearly all people, desire relationships, and he was relieved to know he had one in Chicago—even if it was a brief one formed on a plane trip.



Faces usually brighten when they are offered friendship. At the recreation center where I work out, most people completely ignore one another. But I’ve found that if I offer a friendly greeting or encouragement, immediately the other person responds positively.

Relationships—even fledgling ones—are powerful.

Relationships in Recruiting

When I recruit, I too often forget the potential of relationships. Do you? Maybe you’ve never even considered it. Maybe you’re mired in the losing pattern of recruiting based on need. It usually sounds like this: “We’re without a second-grade teacher. We’re looking for someone to take it each week, but even if you can only serve once every couple of weeks, we will be happy to use you.” We end up asking for just a warm body, and then too often that’s all we get.

I’ll get back to relationships in recruiting soon, but first I want you to consider an image I’ve found helpful. Picture yourself standing on top of a three-legged stool proclaiming your message of recruitment. “Come serve in kids’ ministry!” Your stool must have three legs or else it will tip and fall and your message won’t get proclaimed. Here are the three legs.

LEG 1: The Leg of Purpose or spiritual vision. This is the “why” of ministry. Carla does this well. As a Sunday morning director in her church, she is by nature a forward-looking, positive person and loves casting vision. “Come help us change the destiny of these precious kids,” she is fond of saying. The focus is all on the children—on changing their lives forever.

“Change the destiny” is the shortened version of her favorite phrase, and her enthusiasm for it is contagious. She has consistently delivered it over a period of time so that her workers repeat it themselves—often. Over the entry to the children’s wing she had written, “Here we change the destiny of young lives.” She uses that phrase effectively when recruiting.

Carla says, “I never recruit to need. Instead, I tell people, ‘The more we have serving, the better we can affect destiny.’” People in her church respond positively. They appreciate her sense of purpose, and as a result, she is well staffed with volunteers. She adds, “In fact, I struggle more with trying to figure out what to have them do when I have more than enough to fill the slots.” Wouldn’t you love to have Carla’s problem?

When you recruit, you will be much more effective if this “leg” of your stool is firmly in place and is a basis for your message to potential volunteers.

LEG 2: The Leg of Position or service activity. This is the “what” of ministry. Rather than recruiting to the “why” of ministry, you are recruiting to what it is that people are going to do. Instead of being vision-based, recruiting is volunteer-based.

David’s church uses this approach. His senior pastor is a strong proponent of finding your spiritual gift and putting it to use. As the children’s pastor and the largest user of volunteers, David gets the benefit because he has matched the various positions in his kids’ ministry with his church’s spiritual gift assessment.

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It’s very satisfying for him, because it so clearly aligns with a major emphasis of his whole church, and people are eager to serve where they feel most comfortable. David puts it this way: “Every Christian must find their ‘seat on the bus’ of ministry. We say all the time around here, ‘get on the bus’ and by that we mean find a place to serve. But we also tell people, ‘Find YOUR seat—your spiritual gift seat.’ Why? Because we believe they will feel so much more fulfilled when they find their fit—their seat on the bus.”

David doesn’t recruit based on need if there is any way to avoid it. “I never just say, ‘We need help!’ because what you get when you recruit based on need is a square peg in a round hole. You’ll get an administrator volunteering to teach or a teacher volunteering to administer. As a result everyone—kids, other volunteers and the individual—are frustrated.”

Like Carla, David also enjoys a good success rate in recruiting. In fact, he has a waiting list for teachers. He has found this leg of the recruiting stool very effective. It works great for him.

Imagine blending Carla’s approach with David’s. You’d have a pretty effective strategy, wouldn’t you? I’ve seen a bunch of effective leaders do that very thing. But let me suggest a third leg.

LEG 3: The Leg of Relationship or personal connection. This is the “who” of ministry. One of the greatest fears that hinders people from serving, especially in larger churches, is that they know no one in a potential service opportunity. How many people are so outgoing that they will volunteer to work with total strangers? Not many. Think about the flip side: most who do volunteer already have a relationship, a friendship, or an acquaintance with at least one person in that ministry.

So ... do you ever emphasize relationship when you recruit? Even if you have the other two legs of the stool in place, people may still be reluctant if they face serving alongside people they don't know.

If you did emphasize relationships in recruiting, it would sound like this: “We have the most awesome team in our middle-school department. In addition to ministering to the kids, they have a ball working together. They've become great friends, and they have open arms for more to join them.”

In other words, you tell potential volunteers they will find a place to belong. We're using that strategy right now in our ministry (Awana); in fact, we've named the recruiting campaign “You Belong.” If it's a phrase that works for you, you're welcome to use it as well.

I've done this for a while without consciously knowing I was using this approach. When I worked with churches in the Los Angeles area, I considered my ministry team of volunteers highly gifted and deeply devoted. They loved working together, and it showed in their effort. I would sometimes parade them up front at conferences and events and thank them for their incredible effort, then invite others to join them.

I sincerely believe others saw them as effective and as a close-knit, loving group who had great relationships with one another. As a result, recruiting others to join them

started from a position of strength because of the positive perception that was created.

Do you get the point? A relationship-based approach to recruiting is powerful. In fact, people are many times more likely to say yes to a recruitment plea when it comes from a person with whom they have a relationship. Add to it a call to belong to a group that has the “why” and “what” of ministry already in place, and you've got an incredible strategy for recruiting.

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The three legs of the recruiting stool: purpose, position and relationship. When they are all in place, you have a solid platform from which to proclaim your recruiting message to potential volunteers.

And Eric? It's too bad he's going to be preoccupied with Navy boot camp. I think I could have recruited him for children's ministry in my church. **K**

Larry Fowler is Executive Director of Global Training for Awana, which equips churches and parents in 100 countries to instill lasting biblical faith in kids and teens. He and his wife, Diane, live in the Chicago suburbs.