

The Slippery Slide of Starting Movements

BY C. ANDERSON

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I saw a funny video some years back. The clip showed a kid trying to run up a slippery, wet slide. He would back up, get a running start and go for it with all his might. A few steps up the slide, it would get the best of him. Down he went. Watching him go down, spinning, and flailing was hilarious (it's a little sick, but we seem to enjoy watching others fall grandly). Undeterred he attempted to go up the slide again. He'd shake himself off and giggle loudly. Lowering his head, with a running start, he attacked the challenge ahead. Finally, after a mad dash at it, he somehow made it to the top. There, hands raised in the air, his high-pitched voice screamed with the thrill of victory!

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I can still see his joy, even in the many attempts it took to get to the top. He was determined, unfazed by failure and thoroughly loved participating in this test of the will.

Enjoy the Challenge

Jesus admonished us to be childlike in our faith. As we pursue Disciple Making Movements we should learn from the kid in that video. Learn to laugh. Enjoy the attempts, even when they don't produce success. There is joy in the DMM journey! Starting a movement can be a thrilling challenge.

I coach and train many disciple-makers. During calls or visits, they often express frustration and disappointment. They're stuck in the "messy middle" of this audacious God-sized goal.

We don't often hear failure stories. This is true even when learning from those failures was the very thing that catalyzed the movement. More often, we hear stories of victory, breakthrough, radical multiplication, and organic growth. In the DMM tales, I confess, even the ones I tell, it sounds so easy. Almost always, however, behind the success story is a back story, one that involves numerous lessons learned from failures.

Some Plants Are Fragile to Get Started

I love gardening and playing with plants. Some plants are beautiful but require quite a lot of care to get them growing. Once they are rooted and established, they flourish. In the seedling stage, it's easy to kill them. DMMs can be like this too. Once they are up and running, with the DNA firmly established, there is no stopping them. In the early stages, however, they are easy to kill.

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Count the Cost and Go For It

Jesus told a parable about a man who built a tower and couldn't finish it. He also told of a king who went to war.

²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— ²⁹lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish?" ³¹Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Luke 14:28-30 NKJV.

Every follower of Jesus is called to engage in multiplying disciples (Matt. 28:18). When groups of disciples embrace this truth, movements can begin. There is a price to be paid though, a cost to count, when pursuing this dream.

Expect to experience failure as you go after a DMM. Don't be surprised by it. Gain understanding from difficulties, then move on. Learn, adapt, change, and even laugh at yourself as you slide back down that slippery slope! Keep at it and one day soon you'll get to the top.

Ten Common Failures

Below are ten of the most common failures. See any of these in what you are doing now? Or have done in the past? Don't be dismayed. Laugh (or at least smile), learn, change and try again.

1—FAILURE TO SIMPLIFY.

How we love to complicate things! Simplicity is not only beautiful. It multiplies easily. Resist the temptation to create structure or complex systems. In reporting, training, evangelism, story-telling or story-crafting approaches, keep it simple.

While working in South Asia we realized the process we were using of crafting stories and creating story sets was too complex. Our indigenous workers struggled with it, even with significant training. If we wanted our method to reproduce, we had to simplify. It took hard work to find new, simpler ways. We had to let go of some ideals and desires to keep things simple.

A rule of thumb is: if it takes more than an hour or two to train someone to do it, it's too complicated. If a fourth or fifth grader can't learn it, it's not simple enough.

2—FAILURE TO CONTEXTUALIZE.

We often apply methods and practices without considering the context. It's human nature. We want a magic formula for success. We watch a movie, or visit a DMM that is multiplying well, and come back enthused. "I am going to do things exactly as they do it there!" we declare.

Don't try to reach Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists with the same approach. It doesn't work! World-views are too different. The same story or Bible study set you used for high caste Brahmins in Bali will likely not work well in Chicago with Polish immigrants.

DMMs are rapidly growing in poor, rural communities. They also are accelerating in places with significant levels of persecution. Your context may be quite different. What those movements *do* may not work in your place, with the people you are trying to reach.

That doesn't mean a movement can't happen where you are. It just means that you have to contextualize your approach. Adapt principles but adjust methods. Experiment and observe.

There may be someone working in your people group who is not necessarily applying DMM principles but is seeing great success in evangelism. What can you learn from them? How could you adapt it to fit DMM principles? To make it more reproducible and organic?

Some things simply can't be transplanted or adapted. They are too foreign. If I try to grow a tropical plant in Minnesota, it will likely die. The climate is too different.

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3—FAILURE TO LAY A STRONG FOUNDATION.

We sometimes expect rapid results without building strong foundations. We hear about how quickly movements multiply, but that can give the wrong impression. *Once they are moving, they do indeed grow quickly.* What we fail to realize is that getting the first groups started can take some time. This is particularly true when working cross-culturally and in a resistant context. It can also be true when there are many traditional churches nearby.

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I have seen movement leaders and trainers who started movements relocate to new places. They know how to start a DMM and have done so before. Still, it takes time for them to start another one in a new place. This is not uncommon. It shouldn't be a surprise. Digging the foundation, establishing yourself spiritually and relationally in a new community is slow work. These strong foundations will lay the groundwork to sustain future growth and the radical multiplication God wants to bring. If you are an insider to the culture, this does accelerate things significantly. Still, there is a foundation that must be laid.

4—FAILURE TO HUMBLY EVALUATE

Success can become our greatest problem. When we see significant growth, it is easy to grow smug. The temptation to *over-report* to please donors creeps in for many. I'm not talking about having an optimistic outlook here. Many leaders have that. What I'm referring to is

a lack of integrity in reporting due to laziness or letting financial donor pressure get the best of you. Along with this comes the tendency to *under-evaluate* what we are doing because we haven't tracked things properly and honestly. Pride and busyness cause issues that can lead to the movement's failure if left unchecked.

5—FAILURE TO LOCALIZE FINANCIAL OWNERSHIP

Finances are needed to grow movements among the unreached. No doubt about it. Great caution must be taken though in whether, if ever, you bring in outside funds. It is easy to kill a movement with money. It destroys local ownership, initiative, and sustainability. Outside donors begin to control decision making rather than the indigenous leaders.

6—FAILURE TO PERSEVERE

Learn to "fail forward." Perseverance is a crucial characteristic of every disciple-maker's life. This is particularly true in those who've chosen to pioneer DMMs among the least reached peoples of the world. Don't give up and don't give in. If what you are doing isn't working yet, and you are prayerfully evaluating regularly, just keep going. Persevere. God will bring it about as you refuse to give up. (Gal. 6:9)

7—FAILURE TO MULTIPLY AND TRAIN LEADERS

Movements can fail due to a lack of trained leaders. By this, I don't mean seminary graduates. I mean those who have been mentored in the field. Movements that give focused time to leadership development can sustain growth. Those that fail to prioritize this are unable to.

8—FAILURE TO DIVERSIFY GIFTINGS

Some years ago, I read that a characteristic of movements is that they have a charismatic leader. I've seen this to be true. Movements that are sustained, however, do not depend on one apostolic leader. It is not easy for powerful leaders to move into the background. Many fail to release control and authority. They love being in the limelight, getting the glory for the growth happening. Many enjoy the perks of being flown around the world to speak or attend conferences and share about the multiplication their

movement is experiencing. This is a significant danger. Charisma can get things started, but only when there is a strong team of elders and trainers who work together are movements sustained. One man shows don't multiply.

9—FAILURE TO EMBRACE SUFFERING

Suffering and movements go hand in hand. It is easy though to under-estimate the spiritual warfare and traditional church opposition that is normal when a movement takes off. Many don't adequately count that cost and grow timid or confused when this happens. Physical persecution from both the church and the world are normal when the radical growth of God's kingdom takes place. The Apostle Paul experienced it and so will we.


Are you willing to be misunderstood? To suffer loss and walk through pain? This is particularly hard for us Western Christians to embrace. We don't have a theology of suffering and are plagued with prosperity teachings. That may be true of some African churches as well.

Financial hardship, spiritual attack, sickness and threats are going to water the growth of the movement. As Paul said to Timothy, "Endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ." (2 Tim. 2:3-4)

10—FAILURE TO QUICKLY LEARN FROM OUR MISHAPS

Entrepreneurs know that if you want to start a successful business you have to be willing to try a few ideas and fail. Fifty percent of small business attempts fail within the first five years.¹ It's not that different when church planting or attempting to start a multiplying movement. I've said it before but will say it again. Make failure your friend and don't let it get you down. Learn from it. Expect it. Make changes and adjustments and try again. Roy Moran in his excellent book "Spent Matches" talks about failing quickly. I agree with him. Don't waste time moping around or condemning yourself. Failure is a success if you've learned from it.

All Heaven Will Dance

The above list is not exhaustive, but ten is enough to think about. No matter what you do, you can't avoid some mistakes on this DMM journey. Almost no one gets to the top on their first try. The great news is that God is cheering for you, laughing with you and helping you have the strength to go after it yet again. Enjoy the slippery slope and celebrate grandly when by some good luck and God's sovereign grace you reach the top. All Heaven will dance as thousands come into the Kingdom...when you multiply disciples effectively among the least, last and lost. 

¹ <https://www.fundera.com/blog/what-percentage-of-small-businesses-fail>