

# Finding *the true*

Want to be an authentic leader? There's a group

**WHILE SOME GROUPS MEET BASED** on quirky interests or community projects, others form specifically to cultivate member self-awareness and human potential. Bill George, a professor at Harvard Business School, teaches an authentic leadership development course that divides students into six-person groups. Members engage in intimate conversations to help each other discover their "true north"—the point at which they're living in accordance with their most deeply held values and principles.

The groups are modeled after an eight-person men's group George founded with three others in 1975. He and fellow group founder Doug Baker wrote *True North Groups: A Powerful Path to Personal and Leadership Development* to help others replicate these groups and become more authentic leaders. To this day, every Wednesday at 7 a.m., George, Baker, three former businessmen, two former lawyers and an architect meet in the living room of a Minneapolis church—of which none of the men are still members—to share their life stories, obstacles and intimate secrets for the purpose of gaining perspective and supporting those in need.

"It's become a vital part of everyone's life," George says. "When you're together that long, you go through a lot of challenges. We've gone through life-threatening illnesses, divorce, career changes and a group member's death. We've

experienced problems with children; one group member lost a son. Where do you go when something like that happens?"

For these guys, the answer is easy. They go to Men's Group—a place for open discussion seldom found in the workplace or even between spouses or social friends. The counsel they receive comes from a variety of perspectives and often results in solutions they wouldn't have seen on their own.

In interviewing 52 leaders for True North Groups, the authors found that people feel most centered in their leadership when they're following their true north, which is only possible after cultivating self awareness. True North Groups are structured to develop just that by using a 12-step curriculum to help reframe peoples' challenges into possibilities. "We ask members to really get down in there and share who they are and how they've become who they are," Baker says. "This gets people out of their heads so they can't talk about their philosophies or theories; they have to talk about their experiences and life journeys. We find this is crucial to bond people quickly and make them understand that they're not alone in this journey."

Unlike typical 12-step programs, True North Groups seek members who are "pretty well buttoned up," Baker says, noting that needy people suck all the air time and can make other members want

# north

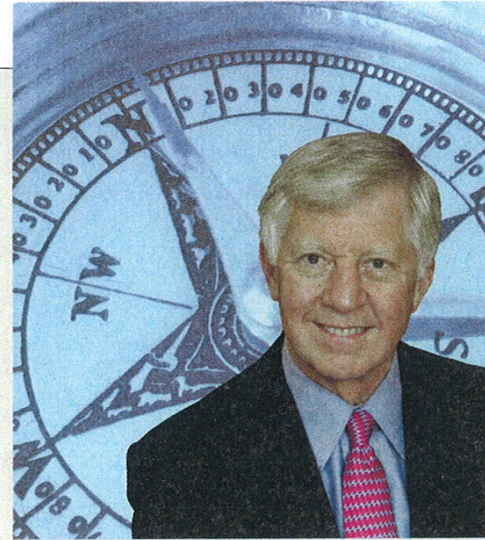
for that, too.

to quit. The only other requirement is that people are open and honest. All must sign a pledge of confidentiality. Once six to eight members are selected, they meet at least four times a month, usually starting each meeting with a ritual like a prayer or reading followed by a check-in period before an assigned facilitator leads the discussion.

The results have been dramatic, says George. He has worked with more than 2,000 students at Harvard, who often cite the course as the highlight of their business school experience. True North Groups have also impacted hundreds of members of the Young Global Leaders of the World Economic Forum as well as international corporations and other campuses such as New York University and the Georgia Institute of Technology. Most recently, George and Baker started a five-day course for senior executives, which has shown how quickly positive change can happen in the lives and careers of participants.

"There's something going on in these groups that's not found elsewhere, certainly not in a traditional classroom or training session," George says. "Groups are providing the capacity to transform people's lives, and what is shocking is how fast this can happen. I find in general, there's a great longing for intimacy, people just don't know who they can trust or how to find it."

Not only are such groups good for advice and human connection, they also help people try on new identities throughout their lives, says Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who has



THROUGH "TRUE NORTH" GROUPS, BILL GEORGE HELPS MEN CONNECT WITH THEIR MOST DEEPLY HELD VALUES.

spent decades studying small groups. "Groups are a way to share your story," Wuthnow says. "You don't just develop your identity at 13, and then that's it. You keep refashioning yourself as you go through life, and when you're part of a group or series of groups, you test out a new identity by telling a new story."

## MEN'S GROUP GREATLY INFLUENCED

George and Baker's identities and provided a forum for each to make difficult career decisions. Climbing the ladder at a Fortune 100 financial services company, George began to discover dubious financial practices that clashed with his goal to become an inspirational, growth-oriented leader. Thanks to the opportunity to vet his concerns and get feedback from the group, he decided to switch paths and join Medtronic, a medical technology company that better mirrored his values. The fall of Enron made his thesis all the more clear: "We need a new generation of authentic leaders to become value-centered leaders guiding great organizations." George ultimately became CEO of Medtronic, something that would not have

been possible without the help of Men's Group, he says.

Baker's story is similar. His over-commitment to work was hurting his health and marriage, so when a senior position with American Express surfaced in New York, the group recommended he forego it to focus on repairing these aspects of his life. He's been coaching, teaching, writing

and traveling ever since. He's helped start eight True North Groups for young people and is working to establish one for clergy members and another for hospital professionals.

The pair plans to open the True North Groups Institute to bring the concept to more emerging leaders and provide resources—like a help line, an archive of discussion topics, tips for problem solving and a registry of trained facilitators—to meet the growing demand for this kind of support network.

While Men's Group has evolved from a cadre of ambitious young professionals to a group of friends more concerned with health, retirement and the spiritual questions that come with age, it has been there through and through, and its members say they have become better leaders, not to mention better people, because of the group. "We've had some amazing successes; we've had a bankruptcy. We've had weddings for our children—most of us are grandfathers now. It's all those lovely and terrible events that can happen in lives that we've gone through together as a community," Baker says. "We'll meet until every last light goes out." | S.R.