



**Dan Schawbel**, Contributor

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## Bill George On Creating Your Own True North Group

I recently had the pleasure of connecting with [Bill George](#), who is a professor of management practice at Harvard Business School, where he has taught leadership since 2004. He is the author of four best-selling books, including *7 Lessons for Leading in Crisis*, *True North*, *Finding Your True North*, and *Authentic Leadership*. Mr. George is the former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Medtronic. He currently serves as a director of ExxonMobil and Goldman Sachs, and also recently served on the boards of Novartis and Target Corporation.



Bill George

His latest book, [True North Groups](#), written with Doug Baker, is out today! In this interview, Mr. George talks about what True North Groups are, how to select the right people to be part of them, why leaders need support groups, and much more.

### **What is a True North Group and how do you select the right people to be in it?**

True North Groups are small, intimate groups of peers where people can talk openly in confidential settings. They provide a safe place where people can share their experiences, challenges, and frustrations and get honest feedback. At various times your True North Group will function as a nurturer, a grounding rod, a truth teller, and a mirror. At their best, the members of your group serve each other as caring coaches and thoughtful mentors.

True North Groups help people grow as human beings and leaders, as they learn to accept themselves and their strengths and weaknesses and gain confidence that others accept them for who they are. True North Groups provide the feedback that enable people to understand their blind spots, open up hidden areas, and gain a deeper understanding of themselves. They offer unique environments for people to develop self-awareness, self-compassion, and authenticity, and the confidence to navigate difficult situations in their life and work.

To form a True North Group, gather together a small group of people who are compatible and respectful of each other. In selecting members, it is essential to hold to rigorous standards and not to compromise as one or two ill-fitting members can easily reduce the feelings of trust and openness. Solid members lead to better, deeper discussions of significant topics.

### **When a leader decides that they can be successful without help, what tends to happen?**

When leaders try to succeed without the help, support and feedback from other people, they are more likely to fail because they are not seeking wise counsel and are subject to being overly influenced by external forces. A True North Group provides support in challenging times. By sharing yourself in intimate ways, you learn to trust your group when you may be losing your bearings or deviating from your beliefs and values.

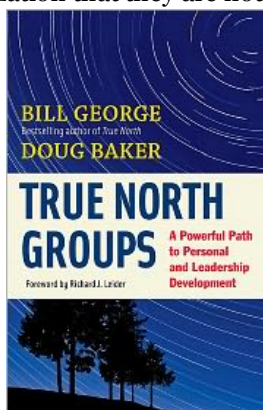
Being an effective leader is ultimately not about intelligence, as leadership is more about emotional intelligence (EQ) – being self-aware and building authentic, open relationships. Research on leaders shows that EQ is much more important than characteristics, knowledge, and skills. Effective leadership, sustainable over long periods of time, must come from an authentic place within.

### **During the first few meetings with your group, how should the conversation go and what should members leave with?**

In my new book, *True North Groups*, co-author Doug Baker and I outline a program for the first twelve sessions of your group, as well as over thirty ideas for additional program topics. We recommend starting by sharing your life stories and the people and experiences that have had the greatest impact on your lives, so that people can get to know each other on a personal basis. In the following sessions people should share times they have lost their way or deviated from their values and their True North. In the third session, which may be the most important of all, people share the greatest crucibles in their lives, what they learned from them, and how those earlier life experiences may be impacting their lives today. Members come away from the session with a deep sense of acceptance by others and the realization that they are not alone in facing great challenges.

### **What happens when a member of the group isn't getting along with everyone else or isn't as supportive?**

This is what we term in the book as “the storming phase.” We outline nine common problems, such as loss of trust, violation of group norms, lack of openness and sharing, and breach of confidentiality. In each case we cite examples of how groups we interviewed dealt with these problems, and provide suggestions about how to avoid them.



### **Who is in your True North Group and what value do they add to your life?**

Co-author Doug Baker and I formed our first True North Group in 1975. The eight of us include five business people, two lawyers and an architect. We have met weekly for the past 36 years. In 1983 we formed a couples group with our spouses and two other couples who were good friends. These two groups have been a godsend in my life. They have helped me become more self-aware and open, and enabled me to understand my blind spots. Their support has given me the courage to take risks with significant challenges, and learn how to give and receive feedback in a non-judgmental way.

It was my men's group that gave me the encouragement to give up a promising career at Honeywell to follow my heart to Medtronic and pursue its mission of "restoring people to full life and health." When my wife Penny was diagnosed with breast cancer, it was our couples group that was there for us as Penny went through her surgery.

*Dan Schawbel, recognized as a "[personal branding](#) guru" by The New York Times, is the Managing Partner of Millennial Branding, LLC, a full-service [personal branding](#) agency. Dan is the author of *Me 2.0: 4 Steps to Building Your Future*, the founder of the [Personal Branding](#) Blog, and publisher of [Personal Branding](#) Magazine. He has worked with companies such as Google, Time Warner, Symantec, IBM, EMC, and CitiGroup.*

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