

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



# *Church Growth Lessons*

## **FROM CROSSFIT**

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### Why do people put themselves through workouts that deliberately push them to their limit?

It's that time of year when many of us are concerned with getting fit, eating better, and improving our health. Some of us might renew our gym memberships (and vow to actually go), while others might sign up for weight loss programs. A few might be considering CrossFit, which has become more than a collection of daily workouts and gyms ("boxes" as CrossFit calls them) around the world. **The program transcended its organizational boundaries** and has become a way of thinking about fitness in a culture that seems to be mostly consumed with eating that extra order of fries and watching the newest series on Netflix. CrossFit has developed a new lifestyle for many of its millions of members, who typically go to the "box" several times a week. It begs the question: **why does CrossFit have millions of loyal members all over the world, and what can we learn from their methods to help our churches reach people in our communities?**

In the same way that Kleenex defines tissue and Xerox defines copiers, **CrossFit is now synonymous with the idea of high-intensity workouts and interval training, forming a results-oriented approach to exercise.** The growth of this business has been meteoric. From its humble beginnings in 2000 to today, there are over 13,000 CrossFit-affiliated gyms around the world, and CrossFit is quickly establishing its brand status with the identification of an entire category of workouts.

CrossFit is the kind of organization that we need to closely examine for lessons we can apply to our own lives and our organizations. Let's start with looking at some statistics about CrossFit members:

- Nearly 60% have kids [\[ref\]](#)
- 40% have some sort of post-graduate degree [\[ref\]](#)

There's some overlap in demographics between CrossFitters and churchgoers. Most importantly though, CrossFitters typically demonstrate an inspiring commitment to personal development.

In a market that has been dominated by brands targeted at women, **CrossFit has seen historically high numbers of men engaging in regular fitness routines, which is an important takeaway for churches that have difficulty attracting men.** CrossFit is a breathtaking business not only because of its workouts but also because of its scale and impact. Here are five lessons from CrossFit that we can apply to our churches as we think about how to grow.

#### Focus on results

The CrossFit community has an undeniable focus on achieving results. The functional exercises are defined by helping members shape and sculpt their physiques. When people sign up for CrossFit, they agree to participate in regular regimes that measure their results against the rest of their group and — even more importantly—against themselves. **CrossFit focuses on fervently helping its participants understand what they're doing**

**and the difference it makes in their lives.** Similarly, our churches need to evaluate the results that we're helping our people to achieve.

**We need to consider a results-oriented point of view and implement that perspective into what we talk about on Sunday mornings.** If we can't clearly define how being engaged with our church can make a difference in someone's life, it's going to be difficult for anyone to spread that idea to his or her friends. Our churches could learn to become more focused on the result that we're here to help the folks who attend our churches on a regular basis experience. As Andy Stanley has said, "Following Jesus will make your life better and will make you better at life."



### It's fierce and friendly

It doesn't take long to understand that CrossFit is intense. Social media feeds are full of content showing people flipping giant tires, lifting incredible amounts of weight, and pushing their bodies to their limits. **While it would be easy to assume that the culture within CrossFit must be machismo-driven, CrossFit at its core is designed to be a friendly environment that drives people to achieve their best in a supportive atmosphere.** This comes out of its roots in the military and law enforcement.

This idea of "leave no man behind" has trickled down to the class level where team members will encourage each other to achieve their personal best. **Rather than fostering competition, CrossFit's focus is on developing supportive and friendly environments.**

In fact, if you listen to the guys and gals who attend CrossFit regularly, **they'll talk about the people in their CrossFit classes being some of their closest and dearest friends.** Because they've pushed together and made a difference in each other's lives, and done that in a supportive environment, this combination of fierce and friendly becomes a potent mix for developing a

community that wants to make a difference and supports each other in common goals.

You and I need to evaluate if our churches have supportive, friendly environments. Are they the kind of place where our members reach out to one another and encourage people to connect in positive ways? If a gym is outpacing our ability to build community, then we need to sit up and notice. **If a workout community is outpacing our churches' capacity to care for each other, then we're doing something wrong in the life of our church.**

### Tell stories through social media

Look at what CrossFit communicates on its various social media platforms and you'll consistently see the stories of its participants and their results. These stories aren't just about how many reps people do; in fact, very little of it focuses on the actual technical aspects of the workouts. Instead, these stories center on the difference that CrossFit is making in people's lives. ([Scroll through the official CrossFit YouTube videos to see examples.](#)) These stories are compelling to watch, and they show that people from a wide variety of backgrounds are regularly taking part in CrossFit. These folks are amazed at the difference these workouts make across their entire life, not just when they're in the "box".

Our churches tend to spend too much time talking about our next event instead of celebrating the stories of the lives that have been changed through our ministries. Excelling in communicating how our church changes us for the better is **the kind of thing that people will share with their friends because it's so inspiring.**

### It's simple and repeatable

The current CrossFit organizational architecture is breathtakingly lean. Similar to the way Uber has downloaded most of their capital costs onto the individual drivers, the actual management of Uber is lean in comparison to the capital resource of drivers around the world. CrossFit as an organization spends all its time focusing on the brand, the management process, and best practices, and downloads all the capital expenses to individual gym owners. CrossFit doesn't assume any of those expenses in its operation. This lean structure has meant that a very small management organization has grown CrossFit to be worth four billion dollars. This is an incredibly large operation with a trim approach. **Imagine that: a fitness organization that doesn't have a lot of "excess fat" in its organizational structure.**



Let us examine our own leadership structure and ask if it is aiding or slowing down our growth. Is our organization so complex that it slows down our ability to reach out and grow? The fact that CrossFit focuses on a very simple transaction with its affiliates gives them a significant market advantage in their ability to move quickly into a lot of locations. A simple and repeatable structure has enabled CrossFit to grow quickly. **I've said it before: you can either have control or you can have growth.** It's very difficult to have both, and CrossFit as an organization has decided that it would prefer growth over control. As a result, it has released control to its local members while staying focused on culture and defining the direction of the entire movement, rather than getting bogged down in operational concerns.

### It spreads by word of mouth

The first rule of CrossFit: Tell everyone you're going to CrossFit.

At its core, CrossFit spreads because it asks others, "Do you know anybody that has joined CrossFit?" It seems that the first rule of CrossFit is that everyone talks about the fact that they go to CrossFit. CrossFit grows because people try it, they invite their friends, and they talk about it. They're proud of the fact that they're making results. **They're seeing that being there three to five times a week is making a difference on their physical goals in life, and they want to celebrate that with their friends.**

There's also a fervent focus on social media and spreading the workouts of the day so members can know what they're getting themselves into as they go to their box of choice. The spreadable ideas of CrossFit seem to transcend the organization as they get passed by word of mouth, social media, and personal recommendations. A study on CrossFit participants found that this group spends a disproportionately small amount of time on traditional media, radio, and television [ref]. However, they spend a disproportionately large amount of time on social media, which makes sense when you see how many times CrossFit is tagged on various social media platforms.

Our churches grow because people tell their friends about them; so what can we take away from CrossFit's publicity? For our churches, the question we need to ask is, "Are we providing tools and resources in the same way that CrossFit provides tools and resources to invite others in? Do we have an easy to understand **ask** that **our people** can ask of their friends to help them plug into what's happening at our church?"

In the same way that CrossFit goes out of its way to make a simple invitation, our churches need to do the same and make it easy for people to invite their friends to come and be a part of what's happening in our churches.

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