

GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATING SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

From: Small Groups.com "Tips for Facilitating a Group Discussion" by Carter Moss

Facilitating a group discussion can be intimidating for a lot of us. We may feel insecure in our ability to have all the right answers, or in our ability to handle whatever curve balls get thrown our way (there will be some!). It can also be challenging to know whether we're doing a good job or not. But, here's the good news: facilitating a group discussion is not about any of those things!!!! We don't have to have all of the right answers. We don't have to lead the perfect discussion every time. And, here's the best reminder – we never lead alone, or in our own power –we have The Spirit's help and power all the time!

As you facilitate your small group discussion, your main goal is to create discussion. We want to challenge people to think about the topic at hand, and create a safe environment for people to share their thoughts—to help everyone feel valued about the input they've offered. That's all we've got to do. Here are some practical guidelines and principles that can help you facilitate a good small group discussion:

ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

One of the most important skills in facilitating a small-group discussion is asking the right questions. Here are a few secrets to good question asking:

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Avoid the yes/no, true/false, and multiple-choice questions—"Is Jesus the sheep or the shepherd in this parable?" Similarly, avoid questions that let people off the hook with a simple Sunday-school answer—"Why did Jesus die on the cross?" You want to ask questions that require people to share some actual thoughts and feelings.
- **Ask follow-up questions.** Many people default to staying pretty surface-level with their answers to your questions, so get in the habit of not letting them off the hook. You want to get to the core of what they are saying. Ask more questions that follow up on their response. Here are some examples of good follow-up questions for the short/simple answers that people often give:
 - What makes you say that?
 - How do you feel about that?
 - How would you explain your answer to a non-Christian friend or neighbor?
- **Ask questions that bring forth various perspectives.** Sometimes, if we always agree with each other, and with every word that every author we read says, then it makes for a pretty boring group and a somewhat pointless discussion. The point of actually discussing things is to get different perspectives and wrestle with the issues! Here are some examples of questions that can help create discussion that brings forth various perspectives:
 - Do you really agree with what the author is saying in that chapter/passage? Why or why not?
 - Why do you think God designed it to work that way? Why not just do (whatever else) instead?
 - What would you say to someone who disagrees with that?
- **Ask application questions.** We need to make sure we apply what we're discussing to our current lives. Otherwise we just leave group a little smarter, rather than with changed lives. So whatever it

is you're discussing, make sure to end with some application questions. You can typically find application questions in the online sermon questions, but below are a few other examples:

- So what does that have to do with our lives today?
- How can you change your perspective from today regarding that issue?
- What one thing can you do differently in this next week to start living that out?

CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Trust is the most important key to really making your small group a place where genuine community can be formed. Group members need to be able to trust each other, and know that the group is a safe place—a place where they can get real and know that they will not be judged, gossiped about, and so on.

Here are three tips to help create this safe environment:

1. Address the privacy & safety issue in your very first meeting, and remind them each week, especially if you have any new members that show up! "What is said here and happens here, stays here." As the leader, be sure to model this safety and confidentiality yourself!
2. When someone shares in the group, affirm their answer/sharing, even if you disagree! Thank them for being open and sharing. Ask others for their insights.
3. Avoid giving unrequested advice within the group: "Well if I were you, I'd just do this.." That is one of the quickest ways to shut someone down from sharing. When you hear others in the group start to do this, gently remind them that "this is a safe group, and we're here to listen, not to give advice."

HANDLING CHALLENGING PEOPLE

The hard part of small groups is that they involve people, and dealing with people is always challenging! Here are some of the common "challenging people" that you may encounter, and some tips on approaching them with grace:

- **The over-talker.** This person always has plenty to say, and loves to be the first person to say it. Each time you meet, remind everyone in the group that this is an equal participation group, and encourage everyone to keep their sharing brief so that it allows everyone a chance to share.

If the problem continues, talk to the person outside of group. Affirm them in what they do contribute, and tell them you need their help in getting some of the other people in the group to open up and share. Sometimes you can go as far as to ask them to commit to not being the first person to answer a question, or to only answer when you call on them—or to even work out a subtle signal you can give them when they are talking too much. Each group is different. A good facilitator will know their group, and figure out what works best for your group members.

- **The non-talker.** This is the quiet person in the group who never wants to share. If you think that doing so won't scare them off even more—that they just need a little prompting—try calling on them periodically to share an answer. Also, be sure to affirm them big-time when they do respond.

If that doesn't work, talk to the person outside of group. Affirm them in what they do contribute,

and let them know that you want more people to get to hear their perspective. Remind them how valuable all of the different perspectives are to the entire group.

- **The tangent-starter.** This person loves to get the group way off track by starting random tangents and rabbit trails. First of all, don't get upset at the tangents, and feel free to go off on them once in a while. When the time comes, firmly bring the group back on track.

If the problem becomes excessive, talk to the person outside of group. Affirm them in what they do contribute, and let them know about the challenge you have in trying to facilitate a good group and bring across certain points each week, and how the tangents make your job harder. Ask them how they can help you.

- **The insensitive person.** This individual gives advice, makes fun of answers and people, cuts people off, or does a variety of other things to offend members within the group. This person is dangerous to the health of your group! They can keep it from being a safe group more quickly than anything else. So always remind everyone of the group guidelines for being a safe group, and how important this is. Have a one-on-one conversation outside of group to let the person know how important a safe group is, and what they can do to help make that happen.

FINAL REMINDERS

The end goal of a group discussion is life change, not perfect discussions or getting through all the material! Stay open to the Holy Spirit during each group meeting and follow where he leads. Don't forget to spend time in prayer before each group meeting, ask God to lead the discussion where he wants it to go. Some of the most memorable group meetings occur when the leader is willing to scrap the plan for the night and address a specific need, or do something fun and spontaneous, following the Spirit's lead.

Remember that God is the one who does the work in people's hearts—we are not responsible for it! We are simply creating an environment for community and life change to happen.