

Tips for Facilitating a Group Discussion

Practical advice for working toward life-change, not spectacular meetings.

by Carter Moss

For many small-group leaders, one of the more intimidating things we do is facilitating a group discussion. Very few of us feel like we'll have all the right answers, or that we can handle whatever curve balls will be thrown our way (and there will be some!). To make matters worse, it's even challenging to gauge whether we're doing a good job or not.

But here's the good news: that's not what facilitating a group discussion is really about. We don't have to have all of the right answers. We don't have to lead the perfect discussion every time. We don't even have to get through all of the material in each meeting!

When we're facilitating in our small group, our main goal is to create discussion. We want to challenge people to think about the topic at hand, and to 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. Thankfully, there are some established practices and principles that can help us accomplish those goals.

Asking Good Questions

One of the most important skills in small-group facilitation is not having all of the right answers, but asking the right questions. Here are a few secrets to good question-asking:

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Avoid the yes/no, true/false, 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. 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 do you think that would've affected you if you had been living in the time of Jesus?
 - How would you explain your answer to a non-Christian friend or neighbor?

The idea is to get at the core of what people are really trying to say.

- **Start an argument.** I like to tell my groups that 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 by playing a little "devil's advocate":

- Do you really agree with what the author is saying in that chapter? Why or why not?

- Why did God design it to work that way? Why not just do (whatever else) instead?
- What would you say to someone who disagrees with that?
- Why do we really have to do it like that? Why can't we just go (some other route) instead?
- **Make sure the rubber hits the road.** I often tell my small group that by the end of the night, 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.

Here are some examples:

- So what in the world 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? (Some groups will add accountability to this question—recording what members share and asking them to report back the next week.)

Creating a Safe Environment

Trust is perhaps the most vital 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 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.

So how do you create this safe environment? There are some important steps you can take. First, make sure to cover the privacy and safety issue in your group guidelines, or covenant. Put it on paper that "what is said here and happens here, stays here." Feel free to review these same group guidelines every single time a new person shows up to group. And as the leader, be sure to model this safety and confidentiality yourself!

When someone shares in the group—no matter how much you may disagree, or how theologically incorrect they may be—make sure they feel affirmed about their answer in the moment. Later, you can (and often should) talk to them about their comments outside of group, but it should be done one-on-one.

Also, 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 other group members start to do this, gently remind them that "this is a safe group, and we're here to listen, not to give advice."

Handling the Challenging People

The hard part of small groups is that they involve people, and dealing with people is always messy. One of my favorite book titles has always been the one I find most true: *Everybody's Normal Until You Get to Know Them*. That includes me!

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. Remind everyone in the group guidelines that this is an equal participation group. So if you have 10 people in the group, you want each person to contribute their 10 percent to the discussion.

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 to much.

- **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. Again, 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 awhile. When the time comes, firmly bring the group back on track.

If the problem becomes excessive, again, 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 remind everyone of the group guidelines again, and definitely have the 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.

Remember—the end goal of a group discussion is life change, not perfect discussions or getting through all the material. So stay open to the Holy Spirit during each group meeting and follow where he leads. 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.

It's also important to spend some time in prayer before each group meeting. Ask that God would lead the discussion where he wants it to go. And get an apprentice who can help you facilitate, so that you don't have to go it alone.

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.

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