

Tips for Facilitating Group Discussion

Practical advice for meetings that produce life-change

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 every curveball thrown our way. To make matters worse, it's challenging to gauge whether we're doing a good job.

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 asking the right questions, not having all of the right answers. Here are a few secrets to asking good questions:

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. A good example is asking about experiences: "When have you experienced mercy?" You might also ask, "What does it look like to care for orphans in the 21st century?" Open-ended questions invite group members to think critically, consider their feelings, and answer in multiple ways.

Ask follow-up questions. Many people default to staying pretty surface-level with their answers, 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?

Start an argument. I like to tell my groups that if we always agree with each other and with the author of our study, 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 "devil's advocate":

- Do you 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 tell my small group that by the end of the night, we need to make sure we apply what we're discussing to our 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 has our discussion changed your perspective regarding this issue?
- What one thing can you do differently in this next week to start living this 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 makes your small group a place where genuine community can form. Group members need to be able to trust 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 several important factors. Make sure to cover the privacy and safety issue in your group guidelines or covenant. Put it on paper that "what is said and happens here stays here." Review these same group guidelines every single time a new person shows up to group. And as the leader, model this safety and confidentiality yourself.

When people share 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. Thank them for sharing. Later, and outside the group meeting, you can (and often should) talk to them about their comments, but it should be done one-on-one. Let them know you appreciate that they share in the group, and that you want to talk further about a particular comment they made. It can be helpful to ask for clarification on what they said and to ask why they believe it. This can both clear up any occurrences of simply misspeaking and also allow for an opportunity for them to realize their fault on their own. If they still hold on to the incorrect belief, you can lovingly point out the truth to them.

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 by saying, "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. These people always have plenty to say, and love 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 to 10 percent to the discussion.

If the problem continues, talk them outside of group. Affirm their contribution to the conversation, and enlist their help in getting some of the other people in the group to open up and share. Sometimes you may want to ask them to commit to not being the first person to answer a question—or to even work out a subtle signal you can give when they are talking too much.

The non-talker. These people are quiet and never want to share. If you think that doing so won't scare them off even more—that a little prompting is needed—try calling on them periodically to share an answer. Also, be sure to affirm big time when they do respond.

If that doesn't work, talk to non-talkers 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. These people love 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 tangent-starters outside of group. Affirm them in what they do contribute, and convey the challenge the tangents create as you are trying to facilitate a good group and focus on certain points each week. Ask the person how they can help you keep the group on track.

The insensitive person. These individuals give advice, make fun of answers and people, cut people off, or do other things to offend members within the group. These people are 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 insensitive people 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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Discuss

1. How often do you use follow-up questions to dig deeper or clarify a member's answer? What are two follow-up questions you can have at the ready for your next meeting?
2. Group members take cues from you. For instance, if you allow someone to give unrequested advice, group members believe this is acceptable behavior. How can you lovingly let group members know their sharing is inappropriate—whether it's giving advice, cutting others down, or otherwise harming the safety of the group?
3. The remedy for many of the challenging scenarios presented in this article is meeting with the group member one-on-one. How comfortable are you meeting with people for a hard conversation? If you're not comfortable, who can you go to for advice and support?