

Facilitators Guide for Small Groups

If you're going to conduct a small group study, it's good have a clear idea of what it is you ultimately desire to accomplish.

The points listed below are only my idea of how to conduct a small group – what to do, what works best and how to go about it. By no means is it necessary to do it “my way.” I only offer these suggestions and guidelines based on my experience with the many small groups as I've taught been blessed to facilitate. Hopefully this information will help alleviate some of the concerns you or others you're training may have in leading a small group.

Objections/Hesitations/Questions:

1. Why me? I don't know enough to lead a small group.

The best teachers are those who see themselves as “facilitating” a group rather than “leading” one. If you view yourself as the person responsible for keeping the conversation moving along rather than as the one responsible for providing definitive answers to all of the difficult questions that will arise, you'll sleep a lot better at night! Not to mention how much more affective you'll be as a group facilitator. I like to tell people that my favorite answer is “I don't know”!

Facilitating a group is about building trust. It's about letting people know you're not going to make them speak if they don't desire to (a definite small group taboo). It's about letting participants know that you'll keep others from attacking their responses if they take the risk to share openly – even if it's controversial and you don't necessarily agree with them. Remember, the goal is to be open and to discuss, not to control responses so they appear “politically correct” or to arrive at an answer that suits everybody in the room.

2. What if nobody speaks up?

Wow, isn't this our greatest fear?! We ask the question and we're greeted by silence... then what do we do? It may be helpful at the start to let people know that silence is okay, it may be uncomfortable, but it's not always a bad thing.

Tell them to take all the time they need to reflect on the question or to even think of a better question to ask. Give the group permission to be reflective and extemporaneous – it takes the pressure off of everybody.

So, relax. And don't see yourself as the one who has to jump in and break the silence after enduring a few seconds that seem like a few hours. If no one in the group is speaking, just let the question sit with them – somebody *always* speaks up, always.

3. What if somebody says something crazy or heretical or so far off base that people laugh?

I'd say this isn't an "if" but a "when." These types of responses are just part of the process of growth and maturity. You may consider preparing the group for this before the first discussion even begins. It may be good to let them know that within the group are people from all different backgrounds and all different stages of faith.

The goal is *not* to have everyone thinking exactly the same thing, but to probe enough to understand what people are really saying and why – and then respect it or you'll find your group dwindling as the weeks pass.

4. What if someone in the group is dominating the discussion?

Again this is a "when" question not an "if." It seems in every group somebody is a talker. They can't restrain themselves and seldom does it occur to them that everyone else in the group might not be as delighted to hear them speak as they themselves are.

Depending on the degree of the distraction, you may have to deal with this both in the group setting and apart from it.

As you're facilitating the discussion, you may want to use phrases like "thanks for the insight, are there others who would like to share." Or, "while I don't want to force anyone to speak up if you're uncomfortable doing so, I would like to hear what others of you might be thinking."

If the "talker" wants to immediately respond to what someone else offers, feel free to say something like "hang on just a minute, I want to give others a chance to jump in here." They should get the hint... but if not, it's probably time for a private meeting to explain the dynamics of equal sharing and how their "exuberance" sometimes gets in the way.

As a word of caution, be gentle. Stress that they have valuable things to add but it's important for the development of others to draw out as much group discussion as possible.

5. What if I don't have time to adequately prepare?

One of the features of the Workbook is that the questions are mostly open-ended to encourage everyone to participate – whether they've read the chapter in the book or not. Let's face it, we're busy and the worlds in which we navigate are demanding. Some weeks we'll have more time to prepare than others.

If a question demands a certain familiarity with the chapter in the book, I've tried to say something like "have a member of your group read the following section and then comment." This involves those who may not have read the book and also lessens the time you as a facilitator might need to invest in that week's lesson.

6. What if somebody challenges one of "my" responses?

Again, as long as you clarify your role as a "facilitator" of the discussion and not that of the local "answer man," you should be fine. Help the group understand that the goal is not so much to attain mutual agreement but to discuss feelings and understandings in a safe environment where everyone is mutually respected.

If someone challenges your response, just thank them for their input and affirm that it may very well be something that "we all need to consider." Then move on.

7. What are some of the things that I should watch for that tend to lessen the discussion?

Internal Power Struggles:

Keep an ear open for people who might have strong opposing views on an issue and couch their responses as if they're expressing them to the group when in fact they are lobbing salvos at each other.

These situations will insert tension in the group and intimidate others from speaking up. You can dispel this type of dialogue by keying in on their use of the words like "some people think" or "some people feel... but...". Hold them accountable by saying something like, "For the moment let's forget about what others think, how do 'you' see this and why?" Then give equal time for a response from anyone in the group and move on... *do not allow the two sides to continue responding*. This is about a discussion, not a debate.

If the tension is great enough, you may want to meet with them along with some other leaders apart from the group setting.

Gruff Insensitivity:

Also be sensitive to anyone in the group who might be gruff or insensitive when responding to others. You might say something like, "Joe, I know you didn't mean that to sound as gruff as it probably did, but what I hear you saying is... and repeat what they said.

This will help "Joe" understand that mutual respect is highly valued and that he will be held accountable for his tone *and* attitude in interacting with the group.

Inappropriate Level of Sharing:

Another area of insensitivity is when a member of the group doesn't respect (or understand) social boundaries and maybe gets too personal in what they share.

This is always one of my fears in small group settings. Some people don't share anything while others share *everything*. This can embarrass other members of the group and kill the discussion entirely. If this happens, you may want to have a ready response that redirects the conversation to a lighter note.

It's usually best to acknowledge what has been shared and then say to the rest of the group, "who else has something to share – it doesn't have to be on as deep a level as ___ just shared, I'd just like to hear what else we're thinking – what other thoughts come to mind?"

Constant Depressing Responses:

I used to lead a small group with a female participant who came from a terrible background. When it came time for sharing we would hear of her brother who shot her father who died and left all of his money to his mistress who etc, etc! We all cared about this and wanted to help her – *but it never ended*. Each week there was a new and even worse story that was shared.

From time to time there will be people in your group who dwell on the negative things of life. Your greatest challenge will be to listen, encourage them, love them, but keep them from tanking the entire group!

If this occurs, you might have a time set aside at the beginning to share praises for that week. As well, as you move into the lesson you might want to encourage the group "depressor" to re-frame his/her story in a way that represents victory.

Example: "So how does this help you see the goodness of God more clearly?" Or, "Tell us what you think God is teaching you in this that is really going to help you love others more deeply." Or perhaps, "And what difference is your being a follower of Jesus making in this instance?"

The idea is to help this person begin to reframe the way they see their struggles versus settling for *finding their identity* in their struggles – don't allow them to be the group "downer" or "victim." Help assist them in reframing their walk with God. The group is not necessarily there to take the place of professional counseling.

8. How long should the group meeting last?

This is a very important question and differs from group to group. Some people are more into small group interaction than others and it's good if you can meet the needs of each.

You may want to discuss with the group a two-tier approach. Choose an amount of discussion time that everyone feels comfortable with – say, an hour. Then, you might break for dessert with the understanding that some will have to leave (and be sure you stress that this is perfectly acceptable) while others are welcome to stay and continue if they desire.

Regardless of how well you feel things are going, as the facilitator it is critical that you honor the predetermined time of sharing and break as closely to this as possible. You never know who in the group is watching the clock and counting the minutes until they're "released." When we don't honor our time commitments, we will lose the trust of others and they will be less likely to return – this especially goes for visitors.

As well, some people will enter into some important and in-depth sharing during the break who will never speak up in the group. Don't view the break as wasted time.

Lastly, if you're hosting this in your home, you may wish to let the group know that you have responsibilities the next day and are not willing to go past a specific hour.

Be sure to protect yourself from those night owls who don't mind staying till midnight or past. This will keep you from burning out. Boundaries are very important when hosting small groups.

9. *Don't worry about finishing all of the questions.*

I highlight this because it really is one of the most fundamental principles in facilitating a small group. If you never cover more than a few questions a week but keep the discussion lively, you've achieved your goal.

Group leaders who insist on dragging everyone through all the questions before dismissing the group are leaders who eventually end up with very small groups!

Work at becoming adept at reading your audience. Are they getting impatient? Tired? Upset? Bored? What are they feeling? How is it progressing? Is it time to move on? There may very well be a meeting or two where something else has come up that is of greater interest in discussing than all of these awesome questions I've come up with (smile) combined. Go with what is on the heart and mind of the group. The workbook is to serve the group, not vice versa.

10. What if we finish all the questions early?

Well praise God! You're done. No big deal. Eat dessert, watch a movie together or even dismiss the group early. This is not the unpardonable sin.

However, if you feel that there is more discussion to be had, then it's easy enough to begin asking things about attendees that would help others get to know them better.

For instance, no matter how close we are so some of our friends, do we know where they were born, how they came to a faith decision, where they went to school and why, how they came to work in their present field of interest, what they originally thought they'd like to do versus what they find themselves doing?

Do we know how difficult their early married years were or what type of sports they like, movies they attend, vacations they'd like to take or future plans they have?

There are all kinds of standard questions we can have prepared to cover the allotted time if needed... however the best way to avoid this is to spend enough time contemplating the workbook questions that they spawn even more questions you might want to ask.

11. Don't force somebody to share or to look up and read a passage of Scripture without alerting them beforehand.

I learned this the hard way. In one group I was facilitating was a friend who "grew up in the church." His father was a prominent teacher/preacher and I "assumed" he knew his Bible well. So I gave it little thought in asking him to read a passage from the Book of Hebrews – he turned ten different shades of red and was clueless as to where the Book of Hebrews was.

As terrible as I felt, it paled in comparison to what he must have been feeling.

If you want someone to share or read something, be sure to ask them before the meeting begins and give them time to prepare – even if you're certain it won't be a problem for them. I'd give anything to have that opportunity back!

12. A summary list of things to cover at the first group meeting:

- a. Let's talk about an acceptable amount of time for discussion before we break each week. How long do you think we should go?
- b. I'm open to continuing our sharing after the break as long as it doesn't go beyond X.
- c. This group is about personal and spiritual growth. That means mutual respect for each other regardless of whether we agree with what is said or not.
- d. Discussion is more important to me than finding the "right" answer. I think we'll all learn from the perspectives of others whether we may or may not agree with what their sharing. That's what growth is all about... giving people the space and freedom to work things out.

- e. Sharing is 100% voluntary. Some of you are more inclined to share than others, that's okay – I'll never call on anybody to share if they don't want to. So I don't want anyone sitting there getting uptight because you're afraid you'll be called on.
- f. Though some of you have a lot of really good insights to share with the group, I'm going to be sensitive to giving as many of you an opportunity to share as possible. So please try to be courteous and give others an opportunity to speak.
- g. I'd like to hear what is on your heart whether you've read the chapter in the book or not. We're all busy and some weeks we'll be more prepared to share than others – that's okay.
- h. I hesitate to bring this up because it's a sensitive issue, but let's do our best to honor certain boundaries when sharing. Before you share ask yourself if what you're about to say may be offensive or embarrassing to someone else in the group – this especially goes for spouses! Ha.
- i. Lastly, I certainly believe in the power of God working in groups such as this. And since God is love, let's be sure that everything we do, everything we say, meets the criteria of love.