

Group Discussion Leader Tips

FIRST Basic Rule - Facilitate DON'T teach.

FACILITATOR TIPS

1. Embrace silence and give the group time to answer. Don't rush to fill the void. Often what happens is that after 5 to 10 seconds, the facilitator becomes uncomfortable and rephrases the question or gives the answer. While that fills the silence and relieves everyone's distress, it doesn't promote group discussion. Instead, let silence reign. Sit comfortably. Glance at a few people, but don't open your mouth. Before you know it, the silence will make someone else uncomfortable and they will answer. Chances are that the discussion will be off and running. If not, then after you have allowed a reasonable silence, call on someone that you know is not afraid to talk. Never zero in on the shyest or quietest member. Look for people whose eyes tell you they have an answer. Then smile and gently say, "Tom, what do you think?"
2. Do your best to really LISTEN to each group member. Follow and understand the idea, feeling and concern of the person speaking. Pay **real** attention, the kind that drops everything else and ignores distractions in order to focus on what the other person is saying and feeling. Obviously, listening is one of the key skills that makes a small group work well.
 - Don't listen half-heartedly thinking you know what they're going to say. Our preconceived ideas can keep us from really hearing. Often a speaker can trigger a whole flood of thoughts in us . . . and off we go into our own thoughts. We think at about 400 words per minute, but we speak at about 100 words per minute. That leaves 300 words per minute to do all kinds of things in our minds — we can take vacations, think about what we're doing tomorrow, etc. Discipline yourself to stay focused on listening.
 - Listening is a key way of showing care for people. In effect, listening says "You are valuable to me, so valuable that I am willing to give the time and the effort it takes to truly listen to you now. I care about you." Our careful listening will communicate the love of God in our small group.
 - Face the person that is speaking. Lean forward if you're sitting. Relax and maintain good eye contact. Create an environment where success is easy by affirming responses verbally with brief phrases like "yes," "really?" "hmmm," "oh," and "how interesting!" Occasionally, we ask a question or offer a short comment like, "That must have been really difficult for you." We can also affirm non-verbally when we nod, shake our heads, maintain eye contact, smile, etc. We do all these things in order to show that we are still paying attention (*not asleep or bored*) and to encourage the other person to talk more.
 - Listening is a real art and it is just as important to effective communication as speaking. Remember, even when a comment seems unimportant, the speaker is important.
3. Don't finish a person's sentence for them. Be comfortable waiting for them to find the right words themselves. There is always the chance that you might be wrong in what you thought they were going to say! Waiting lets them know you feel their thoughts are worth hearing.
4. *Never tell a person he is wrong.* Instead, simply redirect the question to others . . . "What do the rest of you think?"

5. Try to call people by name – they’re wearing name tags, so that s/b easy.
6. Don’t ask more than one question at a time.
7. Observe the nonverbal communication (i.e., eye contact, posture, body language, facial expression, mannerisms, etc.) as well as tone of voice. This will help you recognize when further discussion or clarification is needed. It will tell you if someone wants to talk or is hurting, etc! Observing the non-verbals can really help you show the group members that you care. If someone says, “I’m fine” but they look ready to cry, we shouldn’t say, “Oh that’s good,” and move on! Pay attention to what they are saying without words!
8. Don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know, but I will find out.” This is ALWAYS acceptable.
9. Do not make anyone feel stupid for asking a question.
10. Do not be the expert. Redirect the conversation away from you giving all the answers by saying, “Does anyone else in the group want to respond to this question?”
When group members seem to address all their questions and comments to you (the facilitator) rather than to the group, redirect by diverting your eyes to another group member or by using names and encouraging the other members to answer.
11. When the meaning is unclear, ask a question for clarification. For example, “I’m not sure what you meant. Could you please restate that?” Clarification, when done correctly, can be complimentary, as it shows a speaker you are listening and attentive. A good facilitator will be aware of their group and realize that the answer may not have been understood.
12. When you think it would be helpful to the group, restate a speaker’s thought or idea in your own words. . . Asking them if you understood correctly. This demonstrates careful listening and concern.
13. We can’t just swallow everything everyone says hook, line and sinker. Sometimes, we need to ask a person to justify their answer by asking them to give reasons for what they said — However, this should be done in a positive, non-argumentative way. Don’t question them in an intimidating or negative tone.
14. Get the discussion to dig deeper or to extend a line of thought in a discussion by asking questions like:
 - Does anyone have anything to add to what has been said?
 - Is there anything else someone would like to comment on at this point?
15. At various points, you may wish to briefly summarize and highlight what has been previously said. When a group gets bogged down, this technique is effective and helpful because it outlines where the discussion has been and where it should be going. Be sure to summarize carefully, not omitting group members’ names and ideas.
16. Sometimes discussions will get off track and actually make the discussion more relevant. As the facilitator you’ll need to use discernment in determining whether the tangent is good and how long to let the discussion stay side-tracked.

When you sense it's time to get back to the target topic, verbal recognition that the discussion has gotten too far off can usually help you get back to more relevant topics. You could say, "This is interesting. However, we've left our topic." Or you might present a thought-provoking question to draw the discussion back to the initial topic.

At times, you may have to just tell the group that we need to table the tangent conversation until after the group discussion... pointing out that by doing so, those who **want to**, can continue to talk about it further. Having an accepting attitude toward the tangent is important. Maintain respect for each member's opinions.

17. Use "I" messages instead of "you" messages. By using the personal pronoun "I," communication improves because members take responsibility for their own ideas and feelings. Saying "I feel" or "I think" is much more direct and helpful than saying "some people think" or "some folks believe."
18. When a discussion seems too general, vague or abstract, a "personal implication" question helps keep the conversation more direct and specific. These are often the "why" and "how" type of questions. For example:
 - "What is your opinion about that?"
 - "How would what you are talking about affect you personally?"
 - "Have you ever struggled with this issue yourself?"
 - "How does this scripture affect my daily life?"
19. Excessively talkative members can be handled effectively. Some ways to do so are:
 - Break eye contact with the talkative person (*sit beside him, not across from him*) and maintain consistent eye contact with a silent member (*sit opposite him*).
 - When the talkative member pauses in the middle of a lengthy speech, you should break in and say, "I'd like to hear from someone who has not spoken yet." You might then direct a question to a silent member, "Jim, what do you think ...?"
 - It may be necessary for you to speak to the talker after the group - say something like, "I appreciate your comments, and I'm glad you feel free to participate in the discussion. However, if you answer every question, then the more timid group members aren't getting a chance to contribute." The person may experience hurt feelings, so be as gentle as you are firm. You might ask them to instead of answering every question, to help you draw others into the conversation.
20. Personalities sometimes conflict. We may decide that someone talks too much or comes across too strong. Whatever it is, because of their personality, we decide that we don't want to listen any longer. Therefore, we really miss what they want to share. If you find this happening to you, begin to add that person to your prayer list. Praying for folks who irritate us often changes us more than it does them!
21. Some people feel they have nothing worthwhile to say. Others fear that they will look foolish or be rejected. Whatever the case, they remain silent during discussion. If you notice someone in your group who does not contribute, then make a point of talking with them during fellowship time. Chat with them during refreshments. Meet them for lunch if you can. Let them see you as a friend. If you have a co-leader, encourage them to do the same thing.

It is okay to call on the quiet person or to ask them their opinion, but when you do so, make sure that it is a question you know they can easily answer or one that is simply a matter of opinion/taste.

. They may have been raised under the old philosophy of “children should be seen and not heard,” and they are simply waiting for you to give them “permission” to talk. Smile and say, “Mary, what do you think about . . . ?” OR “Mary, would you like to share your opinion?” And then affirm even the shortest, most hesitant response. However, give them the freedom to pass if they wish. Do not pressure them into contributing or criticize them for their silence. Instead, encourage them to participate by listening to, appreciating and affirming their comments.

22. When you get someone who is very dogmatic, legalistic, doesn't care about stepping on toes, or always thinks that they are right, you need to deal with it. Though it is difficult to offer constructive criticism to the person who is always right. Here are some helpful steps:
- Pray for discernment.
 - This person's dogmatic and critical spirit could be a symptom of many problems — perhaps they grew up in a very legalistic church or home and have never truly experienced grace, perhaps they are covering up insecurity, perhaps their theology is so shaky they can't risk an open discussion about it.
 - Begin with the indirect approach. When the person starts using an air of authority, don't be threatened. Smile and gently say, “That's an interesting point. What does someone else think about . . . ?” Calmly suggest that on many questions there are several points of view.
 - If necessary, be direct. Legalism and dogmatism are not healthy for a group. Talk with the person directly, outside the group. Suggest to them that in a study there can be a variety of answers. Suggest that they are missing out on a wonderful opportunity to learn from other group members. Add that the group is actually missing out on their wisdom because the tone they use when talking in the group, makes others shut them out.
 - If they won't listen, then ask another leader to join you in talking with them.
 - If they still won't listen, then you might need to ask them to leave the group. This is an extreme measure, but it is not good to sacrifice the group in order to minister to or contend with one person. A group is designed to minister to its members. When one person's attitude or behavior is destroying the group, that person needs to be asked to leave.
 - If possible, and the person is open, work with them individually outside the group.