

LEADING A SMALL GROUP

New to leading small groups? Let us help!

The Art of
Facilitation

Leading a Small Group

Leading a small group can be either terrifying or very rewarding depending on your personality and level of experience. The purpose of this narrative is to equip and encourage someone who is new to facilitating a small group or to enhance the experience of someone who already is.

The small group leader needs to view themselves as a “facilitator.” Being a facilitator means to think about “group process and not about “individual performance.” A good facilitator knows how to get the group interacting and knows when to step back. If things are getting off-track, they know when to intervene and how to get the group back on track so everyone has a chance to share their thoughts, ideas, and concepts which will bring synergy to the group.

The ideas, suggestions and concepts in this document are not new; it’s simply a compilation of what I have learned over many years of leading small groups and research done on this subject. This information is meant to develop and encourage a new facilitator while creating an amazing environment of sharing and learning by the participant. So let’s get started!

Location:

This booklet is written from the perspective of a para-church organization so location is very subjective. As a para-church organization we actively seek locations outside of local churches themselves. It’s not an affront to any church denomination or building. It’s something we’ve discovered over many years of ministry in the trenches; some people just don’t want to have anything to do with church per se, yet they will come to a different type of environment such as a local café or pub. We also try to encourage a more “missional” mindset or reaching back into the community when it comes to establishing a small group.

Other potential locations to consider:

- Conference rooms or small rooms owned by local businesses.
- A local café
- A local pub (my Thursday night group currently meets at an Irish pub)
- Some businesses will allow their facilities to be used during off hours or even during business hours, one such location in the Phoenix area is Total Wine and More. They have a conference room that can be reserved.
- Be creative and think about your respective community

Leading a Small Group

Some additional things to keep in mind when choosing your location:

1. Is the space clean and free of distractions?

Are there any visual obstacles or sounds that might be distracting to the group? Would visitors be comfortable sitting on the chairs that are available? It seems like common sense, but small things can lead to big distractions. At the pub where I lead a bible study on Thursday nights, things can get very distracting; the music is sometimes too loud, or other groups can be very loud. In spite of these distractions, however, our group loves meeting and fellowshiping there.

2. Is the seating suitable?

While this seems like a no brainer, I have actually set up chairs in rows like a church! Setting up chairs in a circle or around a table is best. It allows the participants to see each other and notice body language that ultimately leads to better interaction and communication.

3. Is the atmosphere inviting?

The atmosphere should be warm and inviting and should reflect your group's personality. Consider playing upbeat music in the background, or providing snacks and beverages. As a facilitator, know your group. If it's a group of athletes, you might consider having posters or publications that show activity. If you're leading a group of woman, introduce feminine touches to the environment such as flowers, candles or table coverings.

4. Is your space ready?

Preparation is key! As a facilitator it's always best to arrive early. Make sure the space is to your expectations because they will vary greatly from location to location. If you're doing a series involving DVD's or computers, etc. make sure everything is set up and working properly. I've learned over the years that technology as good as it is can and will let you down. Sometimes, as in my case, it's only as good as the operator! So, get familiar with whatever equipment you are using well in advance of starting your meeting.

5. Anyone feeling left out?

If someone attends a small group that I facilitate and feels disconnected or left out, I have failed! Although it's not entirely my responsibility to make sure no one feels left out, it's my responsibility (and yours) to be sensitive to it. One thing that helps is using the first 15 minutes or so to simply fellowship with one another. We call it "doing life" together. This

Leading a Small Group

time is just as important (and sometimes more important) than time spent studying or praying. Sometimes new people will not engage in conversation from the start (we will talk about this later). At the very least, new people should get a welcoming hug, handshake or knuckle bump!

So what is “doing life” together? It’s coming to a place of dependence on one another; it’s a way to trust one another and rely on them to invest in us, and they rely on us to invest in them. Doing life together requires doing life with individual people, one at a time; it’s pouring out our lives and investing in theirs through the development of relationship. While it might seem slow and inefficient, it’s beautiful and biblical. A way of doing life together is meeting someone for breakfast, lunch, or simply coffee outside of the group. This is where amazing friendships are developed and common interests are discovered. For myself and some of my friends it’s great conversation while enjoying a beer or fine cigar together.

Time:

The time your group begins and its duration is typically dictated by the facilitator or sometimes by the group as a whole. Times and days of the week vary greatly from group to group; there is not one time or day that is better than the next. I have personally led groups at 6 AM on a Wednesday morning and at 7 PM on Thursday nights. I have my own personal preferences, but sometimes they do not meet the needs of the group as a whole. Some leaders like Saturday mornings to avoid interfering with weekend plans etc. Some leaders prefer early mornings and some prefer evenings. Whatever the case may be, usually its best to decide as a group. But remember, it’s not likely that everyone’s needs and preferences can be met. Along with this, honor the time of those attending. Make sure you start and finish when you say you will. Also remember, sometimes the best conversations and fellowship take place *after* the meeting ends.

Introductions:

When the group is new, introductions are especially important.

Leading a Small Group

- Introduce yourself and define your role and objective with the small group. We will talk about laying some ground rules later but this should be part of your initial introduction to the group.
- Ask each participant to share a little about themselves, what their expectations are and what they hope to gain from being part of the group. You may discover it may not be the group for them. Through this process, I have personally discovered that some participants come with their own agendas. They want something very specific for themselves either through topic of study or even the size of the group. So ask some questions and get to know each other.
- Let participants unpack and share their stories in depth. This will happen as time allows over multiple meetings. There is amazing power and freedom when a person gets to share their story in their own words. This what leads to the development of personal and more in depth relationships outside of the group. Be extremely sensitive in this area. Some stories are very hard to hear and even harder for some to share with the group. As you continue, you will find that personal problems sometimes enter the process. At times they may be discussed openly, at others you may want to have the discussion outside of the group time.

The Plan or Agenda:

Each small group tends to take on a look and feel of its own. Some of this is based on your personality as the facilitator and some of it is based on the participants themselves. Some facilitators are “agenda” driven while others tend to lead in a more casual and spontaneous fashion. Either way can be very effective. The material you cover or your topic of conversation may dictate the best approach for your group. More than likely you will use a combination of both.

I typically jot down a short agenda for each meeting. It reflects the information I want to address with the group and it helps keep things moving and on track. It also helps you remember important points of discussion. Don't limit the work of the Holy Spirit here. God may take the meeting a direction that you didn't plan with topics not on your agenda. If you are new to facilitating small groups I would highly recommend some type of agenda. (we will talk about this more in the next section).

Topics of Study and Conversation:

Leading a Small Group

The topics of study and conversation for your small group is virtually limitless. Typically, you, the facilitator, will dictate the course of study. But as you continue to do life together the needs and desires of the group may be more important than just plowing through a book or DVD series to meet some expectation.

Your small group may be covering sensitive, gender specific material; discussing work or other personal issues or you may be talking about an inspirational book or enjoying a relevant DVD series. Whatever you choose may create the need for specific agenda to keep things flowing from week to week. Since this document is written from a “faith based” perspective most of the examples to follow will be indicative of topics of study related to the Christian experience.

A DVD series for instance is typically broken up into chapters for each week. Some come with a study guide with pertinent questions to be discussed at the end of each session.

Book study is much different. This is where a more spontaneous style of leadership might be beneficial. Most books don't come with a study guide per se, however most are divided into chapter headings that provide a great outline. When going through a book, I typically jot down questions to be discussed as we talk through each chapter. If it's a book on faith, I typically try to find Bible passages that might enhance the discussion. This is where preparation is a must. When it's all said and done, be creative. You may want to find a video clip, poem or other writing that supports your discussion.

From the faith based perspective your topics of study and conversation may be “bible heavy” or “bible light.” An example of bible heavy is “The Grace Walk Experience” by Steve McVey. He teaches this DVD course with a great deal of supporting scripture. Another example would be going through a book of the bible and using other passages of scripture to interpret what is being said.

An example of a “bible light” study is the 33 series from Authentic Manhood. It's a 6-week DVD series designed to inspire and equip men to pursue authentic manhood as modeled by Jesus during the 33 years He lived on earth. While the truths expressed are timeless, it does not have an abundance of scripture presented throughout.

Why is this important? There are different stages of maturity and growth as we become more like Jesus. People new to the Christian walk may be completely lost while going through a book of the bible while others more mature in their faith may want to go deeper in their faith by studying only

Leading a Small Group

the bible. Have your group participate in this discussion and see what's best for the group you start and are called to lead.

Your Preparation as a Facilitator:

Preparation to lead your small group cannot be overstressed! In fact, if you're not prepared it causes a great deal of stress. Here are some key elements to assist with preparation:

1. Do you have an agenda?

An agenda by definition is simply a "list" of things to be considered or done. Here's an example of a simple agenda I have used for many years;

- a. Greeting
- b. Open in prayer
- c. Passage of scripture
- d. Time to briefly share (ask the question, "what's happening in your life this week).
- e. Discussion questions
- f. Recap and final thoughts (you might also want to add a time of prayer request and prayer)

2. Do you know your equipment?

The location you use may be equipped with video and audio equipment. As stated earlier, it's a must to arrive early and make sure whatever you're using is functional. If you're using a video clip as an ice breaker make sure it's cued up to the right spot. If you're using audio, make sure it's adjusted to sensible levels.

3. Do you know the material you are discussing?

Whether you're going through a DVD series or book it's always best to preview your material. Books typically do not have questions for discussion at the end of each chapter. When you prepare, write down questions you have about the material. You can add them to your agenda or like I do in the margin of the books; anything to remind you of important points of discussion.

4. Can you be creative?

Can you introduce a video clip that parallels the topic you are studying? Can you find other writing that supports your discussion? Can you provide a real life example or testimony? Is there an appropriate ice-breaker you could use to make your group more interactive?

Leading a Small Group

Participation:

When group members are just getting to know each other they may be hesitant to speak. You will always have some that rarely speak and some quite honestly, you wish would stop talking (we will talk about managing personalities later). Here are some things to remember regarding participation.

1. Never call on someone to participate.

I have received input from woman-led groups and discovered it is best not to call on someone because people who choose not to say much, like it that way. It doesn't mean they are not engaged; it simply means they're not comfortable talking in front of others. It can be tempting for a leader to say something like, "Carolyn, you haven't said much, is there anything you'd like to add?" "They will be mortified!"

2. Don't let one participant dominate the conversation.

While you want to create a safe place for participants to share their ideas, suggestions and questions, there are those that will dominate the conversation. I know of people who have left small groups never to return because the facilitator could not handle the "over participation of some people. This is where ground rules for you small group come into play. A good idea is to establish a ground rule limiting answers to 2 or 3 minutes so others have a chance to share their thoughts. We will discuss managing personalities later, but for now please let your group know that all questions are welcome and all input has value. You want to create an environment where all voices can be heard. At times, you might want to break your group up into even smaller groups. This allows more people the opportunity to share. At the group level, however, the environment can grow uncomfortable quickly if one person becomes preachy or opinionated.

3. Staying small while growing your influence.

Research has shown the ideal size for the small group is 6-12 people. The smaller environment enhances more intimate and candid conversation. This is typically not accomplished with larger groups. If your group grows too big, you might consider splitting into an entirely new group. This is an effective way to stay "small" while growing your influence. As a leader desiring to build God's kingdom, I am continually looking to influence and train new small group leaders and encourage other leaders to do the same.

Leading a Small Group

4. **Let's talk about commitment.**

A participant's commitment to your group is in reality out of your control. However, your group should not be a revolving door of participants. At the end of the day, life gets in the way of almost all participants at some point, especially if your group meets each week. So while I try to encourage commitment it's something that cannot be strictly enforced. Here are some ways to encourage commitment:

- Exchange email addresses and phone numbers as you start your group
- Phone or text someone during the week
- Email your group each week to encourage them to continue
- Invite someone from the group out to breakfast or lunch
- Encourage your group to reach out to each other; this promotes accountability.

Discussion:

A discussion is by definition the “consideration of a subject by a group; and earnest conversation.”

1. **Guide participants through discussion.**

As a small group leader, this is your objective. Approach your meetings with the goal of engaging people. This allows them to contribute to the spiritual growth of the entire group.

2. **Prepare questions to keep the discussion moving.**

Depending on what your studying and the source material being used, you may need to prepare some questions to keep the discussion moving. Inevitably participants will ask for your opinion on whatever it is your discussing. I like to direct the question back to the group to generate their thoughts and feedback. I also recommending summarizing points being made before moving on to the next question. This will help your group to be on the same page. I would *not* recommend teaching or preaching all the time.

3. **Be transparent.**

Please understand; you don't have to have ALL the answers to lead. Your transparency as a leader will allow you to say, “I don't know, but I will get back to you,” when asked a question you're not prepared to answer. Don't make stuff up. Let “I don't know” be your answer.

Leading a Small Group

4. **Let the group do the talking.**

It's very tempting for leaders with outgoing and strong personalities, to dominate the conversation and steam roll over the participants. Let your group do the talking. Successful small group leaders refrain from speaking extensively. A small group discussion is considered effective when it stimulates sharing by all members. Lecturing or delivering too much information can cause a huge disconnect and lack of interest. Remember: lead with questions; allow everyone to answer and share their opinions. This gives a sense of purpose and belonging in the group. One of the questions I commonly use to start discussion with our group each week is, "What is God doing in your life this week?" Or, "What is challenging you this week?" If you use a bible memory, ask the group how the verse has been used in their lives this week.

Boundaries/ Ground Rules:

As previously mentioned, a good facilitator sets some boundaries and/or ground rules for their small group. Here are a few:

1. **Reinforce that the group is a safe place.**

The desire should be to create an environment where life can be talked about, ideas shared and with the result being transparency. One of the best ways to promote a safe environment is the insistency of confidentiality among the group. Very often topics of discussion are gender specific and things discussed should not be repeated outside of the group. Ministry in the trenches is often heart wrenching and painfully real. As facilitators we need to be sensitive to this. Sometimes an issue may require the assistance and recommendation of and experienced counselor or therapist.

2. **Don't try to fix people.**

Don't try to "fix" individuals or allow others in the group to offer advice that may not be wanted or needed. Sometimes this is hard to control, especially as you encourage an open environment of sharing and being real with each other. The tendency however, especially for men is to "fix" the individual or issue. At some point you need to bring the conversation back on topic. The permission to speak into someone's life is developed by building a trusting relationship

Leading a Small Group

with that person. I've seen too many groups get way laid, attempting to offer counsel for a particular problem. While some may conclude this is part of doing life together, it begs the question: does the person or situation need expert help? Most of the time we can divert these situations by simply suggesting to meet in person after the group. Please hear me out. I'm NOT saying don't talk about personal issues. Personal issues come up when your group has the freedom to share. What I am saying, is don't let this consume the entirety of your time together. Some group leaders allow the first 15-20 of group time for sharing.

3. Avoid “you” statements.

“You statements” are typical phrases many use to try and communicate. We tell a person “you” should do this, or “you” shouldn't do that. Such statements, more often than not, sound like accusations or blame. It conveys judgement. Since no likes being judged “you statements” shut down open communication. They put people on the defensive. This will often make them unwilling or unable to open up to what you or others have to say or allow them to truly listen. They may even leave the group altogether.

4. Start on time.

Honor the time you have established. This is especially true of early morning groups where people need to get to work on time.

5. Encourage open and honest sharing.

Open and honest sharing of viewpoints encourages mutual respect among group members. Insist that others be able to share without being cut off mid-sentence by other group members. This is especially disheartening to those who have a hard time sharing in the first place.

6. Establish permission to put others on pause. (this will be explained in the section Managing Personalities)

Humility/Transparency/:

There is a biblical principle taught in Galatians 6 that says you will “reap what you sow. “ It goes without saying you cannot demand these characteristics of each group member, but you can model it for them.

Leading a Small Group

Humility has been presented to me in several ways. One of the best I've heard is this:

“Humility is trusting God and others with the *real* me. “

Some would conclude this is also the definition of transparency. Years ago when God moved my heart to pursue ministry to men He revealed to me that if I was ever going to connect with other men, I needed to be transparent. This isn't something a former cop wanted to hear. Here's what God spoke very clearly to me regarding transparency; it's simply being *real* with another person.

Being real is:

- Listening with compassion
- Paying attention with your eyes and body language
- Remembering their name
- Honoring them with the gift of listening
- Real works every time!

James 1:19 tells us to be “quick to listen and slow to speak.” I cannot overstate this for leading a small group. Listen with your mouth closed. Great listeners have a tendency to be great ministers. Typically, (for men) this is not our nature; we want to fix stuff immediately. Listening is sometimes a hard lesson to learn but is greatly beneficial as you grow in leadership.

Managing Personalities:

Sometimes it may be necessary to diffuse conflict and redirect discussion. When people express diverse views and are attached to their opinions, conflicts may come about. The behavior you personally model for these diverse opinions can impact the entire group. Try not to act negatively towards them but remain in control of the discussion. Here are some things that may help:

1. Stay in Control.

Don't let one-person de-rail your discussion. Some people, either unknowingly or intentionally, will divert the group away like a runaway train. If you find this happening consider saying something like this; “Tom, I love what you are saying but let me put you on pause for minute to give others a chance to share. “Along with this, as a group leader you will notice the body language of other participants. You'll notice others shifting uneasily in their chairs or even worse, eyes glazed over and completely disconnected from

Leading a Small Group

the group. When this happens its time to reign in the discussion and bring it back on track. At times, you may even want to offer an explanation for what you're doing to get the dialogue flowing again.

Sometimes, you may want to talk with an individual in private where you can shoot straight with them in love and nip disruptions in the bud! This is typically directed towards someone who has a track record of disrupting the group either through editorializing or confrontational remarks. This where honesty and transparency come in; specifically point out what they are doing that is counter-productive to the goals you have for the group. This may be especially hard for a leader who is non-confrontational. Pray about what you will say ahead of time and ask God for the right delivery.

2. **Avoid the “Critical Trap.”**

Open and honest sharing of viewpoints is your goal. Inevitably you will encounter a critical person. Basically, everything that proceeds out of their mouths is a criticism of something or someone. It may be veiled or direct. It may be towards a spouse, their job, our government or politics or even another group member. The list goes on and on. **DON'T FALL INTO THIS TRAP!** I know from experience it will hijack the group and turn it like sour milk. I personally try at all costs not to confront someone about this in the group setting. However, you may need to call someone out, or you may need to ask the person to meet with you for a private conversation. A “come to Jesus” meeting so to speak!

Concluding your meeting:

At the end of the meeting it may be beneficial to recap what was discussed and reaffirm important points or statements that were made. This allows for the recognition and contribution of each group member. Remember, your building family here; a family with open, honest, transparent and respectful communication.

Final Thoughts:

Over many years of leading small groups and training others to lead them, I have witnessed many things about people and group dynamics. People attend small group environments for a variety of reasons which could probably fill many more pages. At the end of the day, no matter why they are there or what their agenda is, it's an opportunity to share Jesus with them; to feed God's sheep and create relationships.

Leading a Small Group

Believer and unbeliever alike all want a sense of community and belonging. Men and woman want to be part of something greater than themselves. They want to share their opinions and thoughts in a respectful environment without judgement or ridicule. Help them to be part of something exciting and vibrant instead of dead and dying!

It is the desire of Breathing Life International to come along side people and organizations and share our passion for building God's kingdom and equipping them with the tools to do just that.

Kerry Hogan

Co-founder, Breathing Life International

For more information or to talk with me in person contact:

kerry@breathinglifeinternational.com

or even better give me a call at:

480.205.5850

Leading a Small Group