

Five Tips for Leading Your Small Group

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As school starts back up, so will plenty of church-sponsored and church-related small groups. Some will study the Bible. Others will read a Christian book together. Almost all will have a designated leader or leaders. While knowing your Bible and having Christlike character are the more important factors, there are also a number of skills which go a long way in leading an effective small group.

1. Communicate early and often, and then follow through.

A good leader is always leading. If you wait until the meeting to lead, it may be too late. In this era of easy communication, there is no reason leaders can't remind the group of upcoming dates and assignments. Make sure everyone knows what is expected. Conclude every meeting by highlighting what's next—what should be read? when is the group meeting? where are they meeting? who will be leading the discussion? Then before the next meeting send out a reminder email (or call or text or tweet or Facebook post). People forget. People are lazy. People get busy. People need lots of friendly reminders to stay on task—especially students.

As for the meeting itself, respect people's time. Get things started promptly and end at the agreed upon time. Sure, emergencies come up. There are exceptions to almost every rule. But people need to know that they can count on you to get the meeting started and ended on time.

Whenever possible, keep things consistent. Changing dates and times almost always leads to dwindling numbers.

Ask people for specific commitments. Don't do everything yourself. Get someone to bring a snack, another person to organize the upcoming barbecue, and someone else to open in prayer next week. This not only builds up others, it will encourage greater participation. Asking for commitments is better than making a general invitation.

2. Think through your questions ahead of time.

If your group consists of nothing but very mature Christians who have known each other for years you may be able to get away with little preparation. But that's not the make up of most groups (and if so, it's probably time to mix things up a little for the sake of newcomers and those just starting out as followers of Christ). Make sure your questions are crisp and clear. If you aren't sure what you are asking, you can be sure no one else will either.

If the selection you are studying (in the Bible or in a book) is hard to understand, you may need a number of knowledge questions. Don't make them so obscure that only seminary trained Christians would know the answer.

But don't make them so painfully obvious (e.g., fill in the blank questions) that everyone is embarrassed to venture forth an answer.

Don't stay at the level of knowledge only. Ask questions which call for analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Prepare final questions which get at the heart.

Be creative in how you phrase your questions. Don't just say "What do you think?" or "How do you feel about this?" or even "How can we apply this to our lives?" Ask questions like:

- What is one thing you want to see change in your life as a result of this study?
- What new promise can you take with you into the week?
- What did you learn about God?
- Where have you seen these things lived out well?
- How does this relate to the cross?
- How does this resemble our church for good or for bad?
- Where is this a struggle for you in your marriage?
- What do you have a hard time believing in God's word?

You get the picture. There are hundreds of good questions you can ask on any given week. Few of them will come to you on the spot without any preparation.

3. Be mindful of group dynamics.

Being a leader is much more than opening and closing in prayer. You should do whatever you can to foster a warm, welcoming environment in your group. This means being especially mindful of new people. The 30 minutes of hang out time before the study may be a sheer delight for the old-timers, but for new people it's bound to feel anxious and awkward. As a leader, you should do whatever you can to make them feel at ease. Ask them questions. Get the group to introduce itself. Have an exercise ready to encourage group sharing. The less people know each other the more structure is needed.

Keep in mind that newcomers may not know your history, your humor, or your theology. I made the mistake once of teasing one of our longtime small group members about not yet being convinced of paedobaptism. It was playful banter between me and these friends, but for the new folks visiting it sent them the (wrong) signal that credobaptists weren't welcome here. I later apologized and explained that I was only joking with my friends and that we'd love to have them (the new couple) in our group. My bad.

One of the hardest and most important things a leader must do is try to include as many people as possible in group discussion. Obviously, the aim is not to make quiet members feel embarrassed, but often the quiet members simply need to be asked. A good leader won't allow every discussion to be dominated by the same two or three people. He will specifically call on those who haven't said much. He may need to gently add from time to time, "Let me see if anyone else has something to add before I come back to you."

A good leader will be sensitive to the mood of the group, discerning whether there is hurt, confusion, sadness, or frustration that needs to be addressed. Don't just play traffic cop. Be a shepherd.

4. Know how to handle conflict.

The worst fear of most small group leaders is that they will be called upon to quell some raging inferno of disagreement. Thankfully, most Christian groups (in my experience) play pretty nice (almost to a fault). Angry conflict is rare, but it does happen. Depending on the circumstances, here are some of the things you may want to say in the

midst of disagreement:

- Sam, it sounds like you are trying to say XYZ. Am I hearing you correctly?
- Amanda has offered a different interpretation. What do the rest of you think? How should we interpret this verse?
- I know it's hard to talk about such a controversial or painful topic, but I don't think we should we run away from constructive conflict. I'd love to hear what everyone else is thinking.
- This is an important discussion, but it's not really involving the whole group. It would be great if the two of you could get together and continue the conversation at a different time.
- It sounds like I may have done something to upset you. Why don't we talk about it after the meeting is done?
- Guys, I'm happy for us have disagreement in this group. But that sounded personal. Let's try to be gentle even when we are passionate.

There may be times where the leader needs to be even more direct. You may have to shut down the conversation, explicitly correct a wrong interpretation, or reprove someone for speaking in a harsh and unedifying way. While we don't want hot-headed leaders who make conflict worse, neither can we afford passive "leaders" who put their own people-pleasing and fear of man above the good of the whole group.

5. Plan for prayer.

If you expect prayer to just happen it will only barely happen. There is nothing wrong with 60 seconds of prayer to begin and end a meeting, if that's your plan. Just to know that without preparation, that's what will almost always happen. Effective times of prayer—whether short or long—take intentional planning. Are you going to ask for prayer requests? If so, how will ensure your "prayer" time is not all sharing with almost no praying? What are prayer requests from previous weeks that need follow up? How long do you want the prayer to be? How many people are you hoping will pray?

Leading in prayer requires clear direction. Don't be afraid to call on certain individuals to pray (usually not newcomers). Remind people that their prayers can be short (in fact, you may want to encourage them to be short). Guide people through different topics (family, church, nation, world, etc.). If your prayer time is generally brief, consider setting aside a meeting every few months for nothing but prayer. We've often done this in our group, usually separating men and women for these most extended times of sharing and prayer.

The biggest difference between a small group that is spiritually, relationally, and biblically edifying and one that feels like an awkward waste of time is leadership. Good leaders do not always get good followers. But it almost never happens that you get good small groups without faithful, wise, skilled men and women to lead them.

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