

---

---

# SMALL GROUP

Bringing people closer to Christ and each other

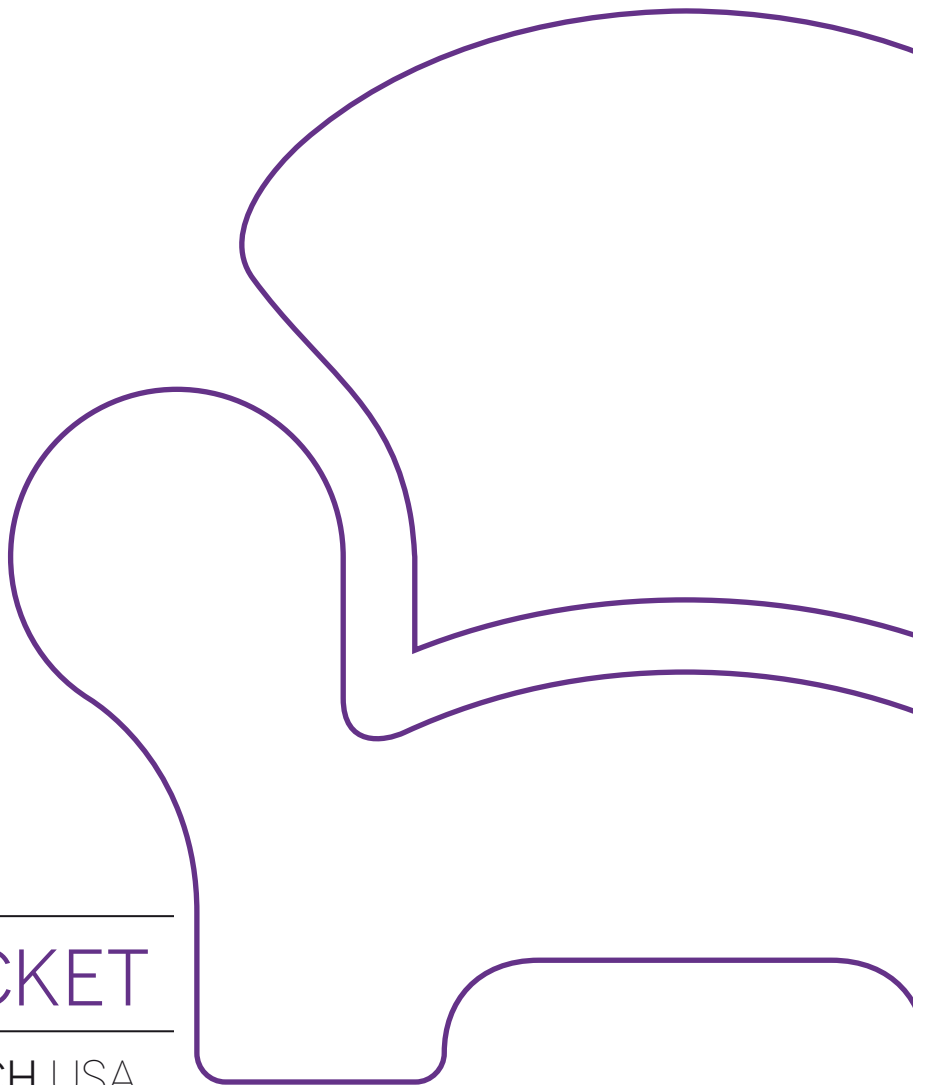
---

RESOURCE PACKET

---

NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH USA

---





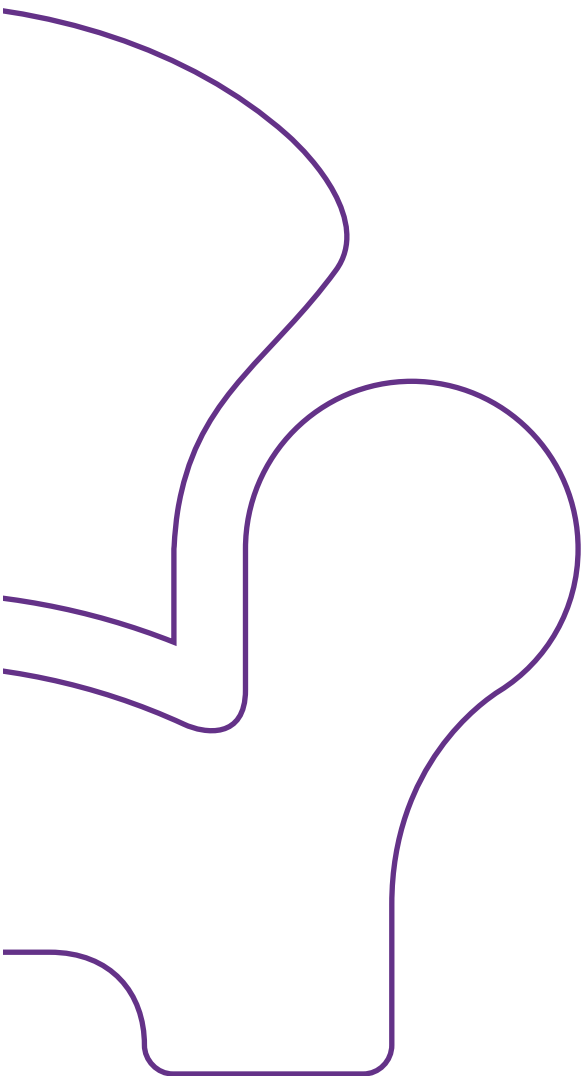
# THE BASICS OF FACILITATING

One of your key roles as a small-group leader is facilitating discussion at your meetings. For some, this opportunity is exciting and thrilling. For others, the task feels daunting. First of all, know that you will improve with time—this is something any veteran leader will tell you. Second, there are several tips that will help you improve as a facilitator, including types of questions to use and keys to keep the discussion moving.

## Types of Questions

The goal of the facilitator is to help group members engage in meaningful dialogue with one another. This allows them to discover biblical truths for themselves. In fact, a mentor once told me that my goal as a small-group leader was to never tell when I could ask. In other words, instead of telling the group that Galatians was written by Paul to the church in Galatia, I should ask the group, “Who is the author of Galatians? And who was it written to?” This gets everyone involved, and sets the tone for discussion instead of lecture.

Use a variety of questions to spark discussion and help group members connect with the topic. As a rule of thumb, you’ll want to follow the order of these questions when leading discussion. They work from more general to very specific and help group members discover God’s truth. In this order, you’ll finish your discussion by actually applying it to your lives. A common mistake of small-group leaders is



jumping to application questions before using the other types of questions to dig into the text. Instead, use the following types of questions in this order and end your meetings at a climactic point in discussion.

### *Launching Questions*

These questions are intended to generate discussion, focusing the group members' attention on a certain topic. They should be open-ended and engaging. The best icebreaker questions fall into this category: they allow all group members to share from personal experience, and they connect their answers to the topic being discussed.

#### *Examples:*

What role did the Bible have in your childhood home?

When have you experienced forgiveness? What was it like?

### *Observation Questions*

These are the only true closed questions you'll use. They seek to clarify what the text says. They ask group members simply to look to the text for the answer. These don't often generate a lot of discussion, so some leaders will want to skip over them. Realize, though, that these questions allow group members and guests alike to answer—because the answer is right in the text. Plus, they challenge us to look more closely at the content and remind us of the details of a passage, especially if we have read the passage before.

#### *Examples:*

In these verses, what does Paul say is necessary for salvation?

What Old Testament characters are mentioned in this passage from Hebrews?

### *Interpretation Questions*

These questions ask "How?", "Why?", or "What do you think?" They challenge group members to consider the meaning of the text, using their own experiences and perspectives. These are often mixed up with application questions (which I'll cover later). The key

difference is that interpretation questions simply seek to make meaning of the text, not to apply the text to our lives.

#### *Examples:*

Why do you think Jesus said that to Mary?

What does it mean to "bear with one another"?

### *Reflection Questions*

These questions seek to make the transition between our understanding of what the text says and its implications for our lives—they transition from interpretation questions to application questions. They seek to put our lives into the context of the biblical account and discover how we should feel, think, and act within that context. They ask the question, "What does this have to do with us?" or "Why was this included in the Bible?"

#### *Examples:*

Why do you think we are often hesitant to confront sin?

What might it look like to care for orphans and widows today?

If Jesus talked so much about money, why do we talk about it so infrequently in church?

### *Application Questions*

These questions help group members take what they've learned and apply it on a personal level. Having discovered the life-changing principles in the text, group members consider what their response will be. True application requires group members to identify a specific response or action they will take within a specific time frame.

#### *Examples:*

What changes will you make this week as a result of our discussion on the creation story?

What one spiritual discipline will you commit to this month? When will you practice this discipline?

### *Guiding Questions*

Even though I've placed these last, use these

questions throughout the discussion to keep the discussion moving and to draw out the main ideas shared. These questions seek to summarize and clarify in order to keep the discussion focused. They also make sure that group members are validated in their sharing and understood by other group members. You can also use these questions to refocus the group when the discussion has gone off on a tangent.

*Examples:*

Are we saying that ... ?

What did you mean when you said ... ?

## Leading Discussion

Good questions are the key to facilitating well, but you'll also need to keep a few things in mind in order to successfully string these questions together into a lively, life-giving discussion. Here are 10 important reminders for facilitating well.

1. Serve as a facilitator, not a lecturer. Your goal is to encourage personal interaction and self-discovery. At the same time, feel free to share your own experiences when appropriate.
2. Focus on what Scripture has to say, not on what you believe as a leader. Point members to Scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to help group members understand and apply the text.
3. Maintain an atmosphere of love and acceptance, which will lead to open discussion. Never put down a person's comments or contribution.
4. Ask open-ended questions that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." If you must ask a "yes or no" question, be sure to follow it with "Why?"
5. Encourage involvement by calling on non-participants by name. This also helps to control the overly talkative members. At the same time, never force participation, which would create an unsafe environment.

6. Stimulate further discussion by responding to members' contributions. You can simply acknowledge their response (Thanks for sharing, Helen.), or you can ask guiding questions to clarify general or vague responses (What do you mean that you feel selfish? Can you flesh that out for us?). Be sure to respond to nonverbal communication (a groan, deep sigh, or laughter) as well—some say up to 90 percent of communication is non-verbal.

7. Deal with incorrect responses and comments by asking, "What do others think?" or "Does everyone agree?" You can also ask, "Do you find that in Scripture?" Be gentle if someone is clearly wrong. It may be better to confront the issue one-on-one outside of the meeting, especially if the group member is passionate about his or her answer.

8. Encourage application by asking, "What can/should we do differently as a result of this discussion?"

9. Keep the discussion on track by acknowledging any issue raised and then suggest tabling it until you finish your present discussion. Keep a positive attitude toward participation, and steer the conversation back to the main topic. On the other hand, sometimes tangents lead to excellent discussions. Use discernment to determine if this tangent is something that your group members need.

10. Realize that community and spiritual growth are our main purposes for small group, not top-notch theological discussions. You'll need to discuss the text in order to apply the principles faithfully, but remember the goal is life change, not simply gaining knowledge.

## The 30 Second Rule

I'll leave you with one final tip that has proven incredibly helpful in leading groups. Too often, leaders ask a question, wait three to five seconds, and then jump in to answer it themselves. This is not helpful—your group members aren't participating,

and they won't be discovering God's Word for themselves. Additionally, they'll learn that you'll always give the answers, which will discourage future participation. Instead, always wait 30 seconds after asking a question.

In order to train yourself in this, ask a question and then glance at your watch. Wait the full 30 seconds. You might also practice at home by sitting in silence for 30 seconds. I will warn you that at first it will feel like an eternity! But here's what I've learned: someone will most likely speak up with an answer before 30 seconds are up. And if no one has an answer, someone will speak up and ask, "What was the question?" This can be a clue to you that the question may not have been clear. You can reword your question to make it clear and concise. Why 30 seconds? It takes at least 20 seconds for many people to process questions, especially questions that synthesize information like reflection and application questions. Allow group members the time they need so everyone can participate in the conversation.

Your role as small-group leader is very important.

You have the privilege of working alongside the Spirit to help people grow. Never underestimate this.

As you spend time leading a group, you'll find that these facilitation skills will become more and more second-nature to you. In the meantime, be intentional about leading your meetings and offer yourself grace when you make mistakes. The truth is that God will use this leadership role to further develop you, so enjoy the journey.

—Amy Jackson; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today

---

---

# ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A SMALL GROUP FACILITATOR

---

*Qualities to look for in the people facilitating small-group discussions*

---

*Mark 13:35–40*

First-class small-group facilitators should demonstrate the following eight characteristics when leading, and preparing to lead, group discussions.

## *Spiritual Characteristics*

**Love** The most important requirement for somebody who wants to serve as a small-group facilitator is that they hold the Greatest Commandment in their heart: love for God and people (Mark 12:29–31). When a facilitator's leadership finds its source in this love and shares it with others, he or she is bound to be strong and successful.

Put simply, there is no better bonding agent than love. When group participants feel loved by a facilitator, they'll be content. They won't want any other facilitator in the world—even if someone else is more confident in leadership or more competent in under-

---

standing God's Word. Just as love covers a multitude of sins, so love covers a multitude of misgivings facilitators often have about their own skills.

**Prayer** Prayer is essential to our communion with God and others. It overflows from the small-group facilitator's love for God and people. Prayer expresses our dependence on the Lord, mediates the flow of His grace into the small group, strengthens our receptivity to the Holy Spirit's guidance and teaching, and shields the group from the enemy's attacks (Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Make no mistake about it: any person serving as a small-group facilitator is at war with the Devil, who wants to throw apart what God has set apart (made holy) in order to bring together. God will powerfully reveal His faithfulness to the group when facilitators demonstrate their faithfulness in their role through prayer.

**Humility** This is a key attribute to any person who imitates Christ's example, as all facilitators should. It allows the facilitator to hear from the Lord, receive His wisdom, serve others, and model spiritual intimacy with the Lord. Good facilitators prioritize the needs of others above their own desires and agenda.

Most people can only be themselves when they feel safe, and a safe environment is born out of humble leadership. Truth and trust go hand-in-hand. Humble people have a way of disarming others and helping them be truthful about who they are and where they need spiritual encouragement.

Humility also communicates that all of us are equally in need of God's grace—that no person is better than another or is loved any differently by God.

Finally, humility is a reflection that a person is teachable, which good facilitators need to be if they are going to hear from the Lord and truly partner with others in building biblical community.

## *Practical Characteristics*

**Authenticity** Authenticity is essential to the success of all small-group facilitators. People will not tolerate for long a small group where members are not real with each other—they have better things to spend their time doing each week.

Arguably, the greatest influence on the dynamics of a group discussion is how real the facilitator is with the other participants. The health of a small group can be directly linked to how free people feel they can be with one another—especially during group discussions. People want to go someplace where they are loved for who they are, rather than who they feel they are supposed to be. Demonstrated vulnerability from the facilitator has tremendous “imprinting power” that ensures the health of the group for the life of the group.

**Inclusiveness** Effective facilitators convene and care for people. They intentionally draw participants into the discussion and include them in prayer because they know this enhances their spiritual growth. They find ways to play to people's strengths during a lesson. They look for ways to give everybody a voice and a purpose to fulfill within the group because they know that building biblical community takes all of the parts working together.

Small-group facilitators who are inclusive resist the temptation to be guarded about the dynamics within their group. Instead, they trust the Lord with those He wants to gather to Himself. They understand that shepherds are to protect their flocks from decreasing because of wolves, not increasing due to more sheep.

**Encouragement** Everyone needs encouragement at some point in their life. Small-group facilitators will most likely use encouragement as a primary catalyst for calling out people's gifts within a discussion and prodding them to participate. Encouragement enables people to hear God's Word

for their lives and helps them to see themselves the way God sees them.

In general, people respond positively to facilitators with positive attitudes. Hope and faith resonate from a facilitator who is encouraging, while a discouraging person dampens the hope and faith of others. A splash of humor doesn't hurt, either—this doesn't require wit as much as an ability to look optimistically at life and its challenges.

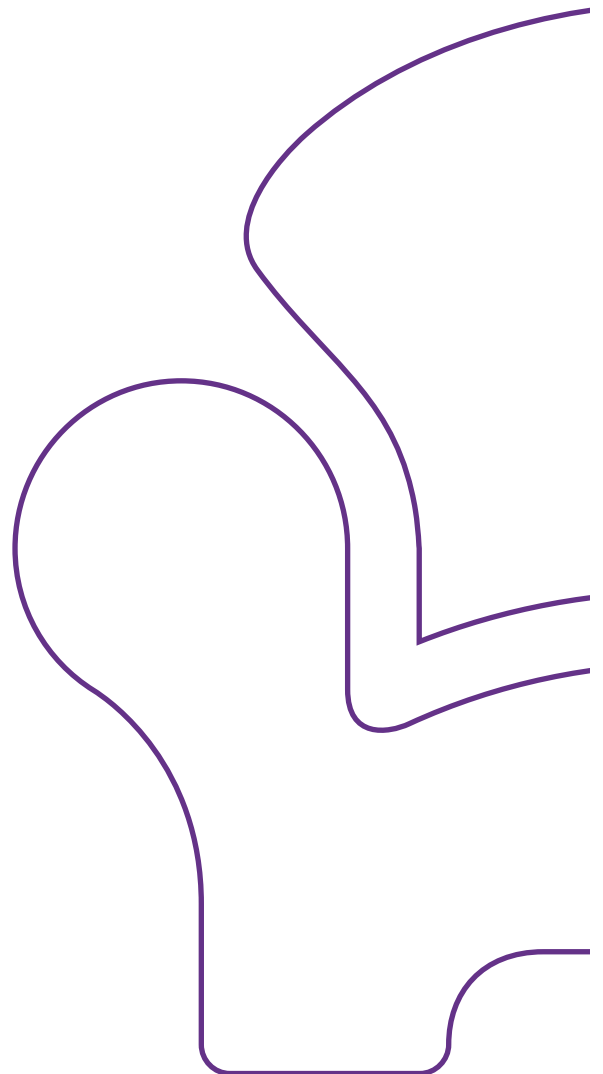
**Consistency** It is vital for group facilitators to follow-through on what they say and promise to do. Showing integrity in word and action creates structural integrity for group life and group discussions. For example, if the facilitator promises to provide time for a member to express an opinion later in the discussion, he or she must do it. Otherwise, the participant becomes disheartened.

A lack of consistency also demolishes one of the pillars that biblical community is built upon: trust. The old adage of “do what you say and say what you mean” is a maxim for group facilitation as well as life in general. Your consistency reveals your commitment to the discussion, and ensures group participants that they can rely on you.

**Listening** Of course we understand that communication is vital to the role of a small-group facilitator. But listening is the key to good communication (James 1:19). One of the best ways facilitators can love the people in their group is to really listen to them.

Listening to others shows respect and increases each person's sense of self-worth within the group, as well as builds greater cohesion or bonding among group participants. Cohesion brings encouragement and motivation for true discipleship. As a group's cohesion increases, so does its level of communication and positive interaction.

—Reid Smith; copyright 2008 by Christianity Today



---

---

---

---

# SMALL GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING

---

*How to respond when people act up, act out, and ask tough questions.*

---

*Philippians 2:1*

Any time you bring together a group of people with different backgrounds, histories, and personalities, conflict and problems are almost inevitable. As a leader, you will need to deal with these issues both before and after they occur. This training is based on actual situations and personality types observed in small group ministry.

### *Dealing with Criticism*

The proper way to deal with criticism, backstabbing, or gossip, is clearly spelled out in Matthew 18:15–17. Let's look at how this Scripture can be used to deal with a common problem: criticism of the church and its leaders. As leader, you must deal with this problem before it gets out of hand. Use these talking points:

- Acknowledge the person's problem or conflict with the church. However, as the group leader, express your total support of the vision and ministers of our church. Encourage the person to share their concerns with church leadership.
  - If an individual has a problem with a specific leader, you should be prepared to invoke Matthew 18:15–17 by asking the question, "Have you talked to him or her about this issue? I would love to talk to you about this but Matthew
-

18 says you are to talk to them first before I can even discuss it with you.”

- If the person has followed Matthew 18 and gone directly to the person but nothing was resolved, then you're to take two or three others with you for the next conversation. However, even at this point this is still not now or ever an open discussion for the group meeting.
- The same procedure applies when the criticism is of other people in the church or in the group.

### *Types of Disruptive Behavior*

Disruptive people are those who, for a variety of reasons, want to make themselves the center of attention. These types can include:

- *The single person who has a history of dating the wrong people.* These people will use the group as their personal counseling session each week, and there is always a new issue or problem. There will also be people who are coming to the group to learn how to change so they can make better choices in the future. These people are worth the group's time.
- *The person who is very lonely or completely alone.* These people are usually great people. The problem is that the group is often the only thing they have in their lives, so they use it to talk about how unhappy they are. You may have to take this person aside and help them understand the impact they are having on the group. This can be a great time of personal and spiritual growth for this person. The group must stay positive and full of hope so lives can be changed.
- *The people who just like to hear themselves speak.* These people will overwhelm anyone who wants to talk and always have to top every story with one of their own. If you're not careful this person will be the only one talking every single week. People will grow weary of this and leave.
- *The person who shows no respect for the rest of the group.* This is the person who shows up late

every week and disrupts the proceedings. This is selfish behavior and must be addressed. This is not a person whose schedule makes them late each week and comes in quietly and joins the group. Nor is this someone who is regularly on time but occasionally has disruptions come up.

- *The parents that allows their kids to run wild through the group.* Each group must have some sort of childcare arrangement. Even with childcare, a child will come in from time to time, so make sure each parent knows that if this happens, they are to quietly take the child away so the group can continue.
- *The person who will stay around for hours after everyone else leaves.* Have a starting and ending time. Hold your ground and tell everyone from day one that you need their cooperation.

God loves people and so should we. However, if these issues are not addressed and solved then the selfish or even legitimate needs of one person will destroy the needs of the rest of the group.

### *How to Confront Disruptive Behavior*

These issues must be confronted for the benefit of the entire group. Most people don't want a confrontation so when issues like this aren't dealt with, they just leave and look for another group. Keep these points in mind:

- How a message is delivered sometimes can be more important than the content. A message delivered in love can help someone change. A message delivered in judgment will always be rejected.
- Confronting someone on an issue that is hurting your group is not easy. However, for the health of the group, and to grow your leadership, you must do it.
- People cannot change until they recognize that they need to.
- People will not change unless they want to. If the message is valid and delivered in love then how they respond to it is not your responsibility.

- Successful groups are those that work together as a team. They support each other, love each other and, many times, have to confront each other.

### Answering Tough Questions

One of the greatest fears any new small group leader has is being asked tough questions that they don't know the answers to. When that happens, remember:

- No one has all the answers.
- Saying, "I don't know" is okay. But follow with, "I'll do my best to find that out for next week." You will find that your people will respect you for that honesty.
- Don't give an answer if you don't know the answer especially when it comes to the Bible. Giving the wrong answer is much worse than saying you don't know.
- Often leaders make honest mistakes and give a wrong answer. Be humble and admit you made a mistake. People will respect your humility and honesty.
- When you get a tough question and don't know the answer, research it yourself and see if you can find the answer. This process will grow you as a leader. If you are struggling, then consult your coach or pastor.
- When you come up with the answer make sure you discuss it in the group so everyone can grow from the exercise. Talk about the process of finding the answer.

### Group Conflict

Your group should look and feel like a community. Communities have all kinds of people from different backgrounds and personalities. When you bring a group like this together, you will eventually have some relational conflict. Here are ways to keep these tough issues from harming the group:

- *Disagreements about biblical issues.* Try to understand where someone comes from and why they feel the way they do about the issue.

This may be one of those times when you have to say, "Let's get back to this next week" so you can be better prepared to address what the Bible says about the issue. Remember that if biblical scholars disagree on many issues, then people in your group will disagree from time to time as well. Trying to prove who is right is a waste of the group's time. In these situations, change the focus to what we all agree on: the basic message of salvation through Jesus.

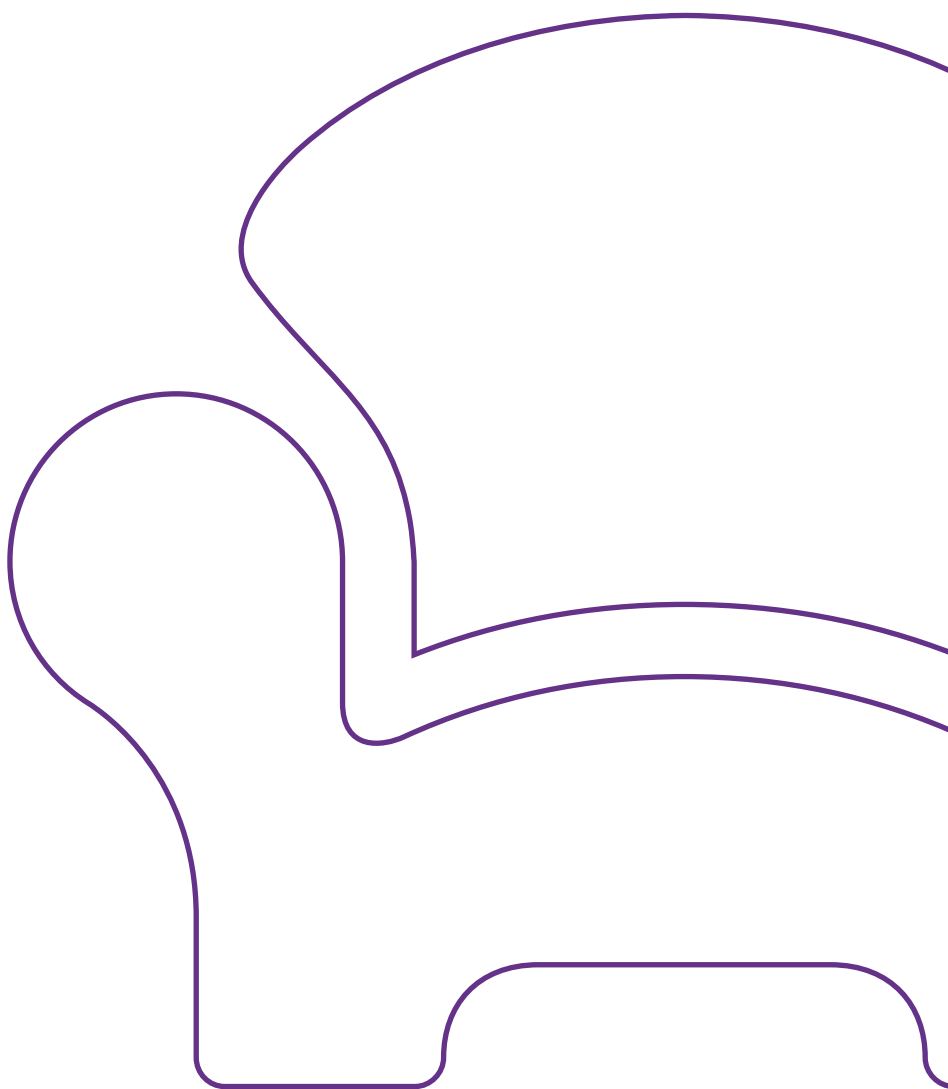
- *Disagreements about what the group should be.* Remember that you are called to lead this group. For you to be happy leading the group it must reflect who you are. If someone doesn't like the group as it is, then lovingly help them find a group that fits them better.
- *Dealing with tough family problems and issues.* Deal with these issues with love and care but be careful not to try to become a family counselor. Difficult issues usually require professional help. The group does not exist to counsel people through tough issues, it exists to love and support them while they're getting the professional help they need.
- *Dealing with relational issues in the group.* Conflict in the group must be resolved in the group. Let tempers settle down, talk about it before the next group, then come back and discuss it openly in the next meeting. There are times when the conflict isn't resolved and people have to agree to disagree on the issue while remaining friends. Sometimes it's better to find resolution outside the group, then come to the group and talk about the resolution.

As leaders, the best thing you can do is to establish healthy boundaries from the beginning. Make sure people do not come with an attitude of, "what can the group do for me." Instead, instill the principle that people are to come looking for what they can give to the group.

—Bay Area Fellowship; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today

---

---



---

---

# FACILITATING GROUP DYNAMICS

---

*Are you using the setting and seating of your group to their full advantage?*

---

*Acts 20:7–12*

If the thought of facilitating a small-group Bible study gives you a stomachache, don't panic. These simple remedies can help you manage your group's dynamics and create a fruitful learning environment.

---

## Setting

Is your group meeting somewhere you would want to be? Think about the places you like to spend time: spinning on a stool in the warmly lit kitchen of a friend's house, sipping coffee at the local bookstore café, lounging around in a basement movie room. Chances are good that these are the places the people in your group prefer, as well. So make your study happen in one of them.

If you find yourself in a fluorescently lit Sunday school room with all the chairs in a circle—get out! Let's face it, that's not where any of us wants to spend time. Find somewhere that is conveniently located and conducive to your group's needs.

Consider these factors when choosing a setting:

---

**Atmosphere** The atmosphere might as well be another person in the group for all the influence it has on the dynamic. If you want a warm, close-knit, comfortable group, find a cozy atmosphere in which to meet. Pull together sofas and oversized pillows. Have blankets on hand and don't let the room get too cold or uncomfortable. Choose softer lighting over harsh, bright light.

In addition, you can significantly affect the way things feel by the sounds you have playing in the background. People don't mind being the first one at a meeting if there is cheerful music playing to cover the silence of not knowing what to say. Adjust the music and the volume throughout the evening to reflect the mood you want to set.

**Distractions** Distractions can be great, when they're the right ones at the right times. When people are thrown together in a group, they may feel awkward and uncertain of what to say or do. Distract them from these fears by meeting somewhere with interesting things to do. This may be as simple as putting a book of questions, a photo album, or a game of chess out on a coffee table. Or it may mean popping in a line-dancing instructional video to play while people are walking in. People connect over activity, so give them something to do.

Just remember to protect your group from bad distractions—the ones that keep people from listening to each other or the lesson. If a café gets too loud, meet in someone's home. If an activity keeps you from studying, make wrapping it up (putting away the game, filing photos on the shelf, etc.) be the signal for the start of the study.

If you want to break down the uncomfortable barriers that keep people from connecting, carve out time for "planned distractions."

**Refreshments** What does Jesus do after He teaches the multitude of people in Mark 6:34? He feeds them. Why? Because taking care of a person's

bodily needs is a great way to show you care, and a great way to earn the trust needed to minister to spiritual needs.

So what does this mean for your group? Fish and bread? Not exactly, but do what you can to have food and drinks on hand. Do any group members love to bake? Will the pastry or bagel shop give you last night's goodies at a discount? Can you buy an oversized barrel of pretzels and a case of bottled water? I think you'll find the enjoyment and appreciation of food to be high. And if you're meeting around dinner time, you may want to consider reserving the back room of a local sandwich shop, so everyone can grab a meal during the "planned distraction" time.

## Seating

You may be asking yourself, "Didn't we cover this under the Atmosphere part? We're supposed to be cozy and have pillows, right?" That's true. But that's not all there is to the trick of seating. This is about positioning yourself (and others) in the room to maximize good group dynamics. Here are some specific tips.

*Who you face determines dynamic.* If you sit directly across from all or the majority of the members of the small group, you will be seen as the teacher, and the conversation style will be set up as question/answer rather than an interactive discussion. Try to arrange the seating in a more circular fashion (although not straight backed chairs in a circle. That would defeat the cozy and the distracting objectives). Tell the group that you're looking for a more circular, group-oriented conversation.

Even though it may feel awkward, don't always look at the person who is responding, and don't always say something when they are done. If no one chimes in, remind the group that you're not the "teacher"—that you're learning from each other and you want to hear what others think. Or ask if anyone has any questions for the person who just spoke. It may

take time for the group to catch on, but it beats the old Sunday school style of a strict teacher/student relationship.

*Eye contact is compelling.* The person you sit directly across from will feel compelled to speak the most, while the person you sit next to will feel the least compelled to respond to questions. That means you should grab that obsessive talker and sit yourself right down beside him or her. This will not only help the over-contributing, but you can do it in a way that makes the person feel really loved and wanted. Just say, “I really want to sit with you tonight. I don’t get to spend enough time with you.” And then steer them to a seat that is directly across from the quietest person in the group.

When you ask questions, look at the quieter people. Ask specific people for their thoughts, and remember to make your questions “What do you think” questions rather than ones with one-word answers. If you want to draw people out, do so by showing that you know how to ask great questions. (For more information on compiling great questions, see the section of this facilitator guide entitled “The making of a good question”.)

Encourage the group to listen to the answer, share their thoughts, and ask follow-up questions.

---

## Protecting

If you want people to feel safe, you need to establish group boundaries. At your first or second meeting, introduce a written covenant that everyone can sign, agreeing to the expectations of the group. If you’re already into a study with a group of people, you can still broach the topic by saying something like, “I just want to put into words what this group is all about—what the expectations are.” Or you may want to ask the group to share what they are looking for—what would be their ideal setting—and agree on some guidelines from there.

Here is a list of guidelines that have been helpful to

many facilitators. Not every group needs the same things, so pick ones that reflect what your group members need.

- What is said in Bible study stays here. You will not be gossiped about.
- What you say or ask is not stupid and will not be treated as such.
- We will love each other by listening, asking follow-up questions, and being conscious of how much we talk compared with how much others in the group are talking.
- We all are allowed to ask for the “umbrella of grace” when we can’t focus, haven’t done our homework, aren’t up to answering a question, etc.
- Anyone can make the bunny ears sign when the conversation has taken off on a rabbit trail. This will be done with kindness and fun.
- We’re an open group that will commit to reaching out to and befriending any person that another member brings.
- We’re a closed, close-knit group that respects the intimacy that we have developed. We will only invite new people if the group agrees on it.
- We commit to be here every week unless we are sick or out of town.
- By being here we are opening ourselves up to accountability and understand that people will ask us about things in our lives because they love us and want God’s best for us.
- We commit to not giving unsolicited “solutions” to others’ problems, but to listening well and praying.
- Anyone can ask for prayer at any time. If something is going on that needs to be prayed for at the moment, everyone will gather around and pray for that person.

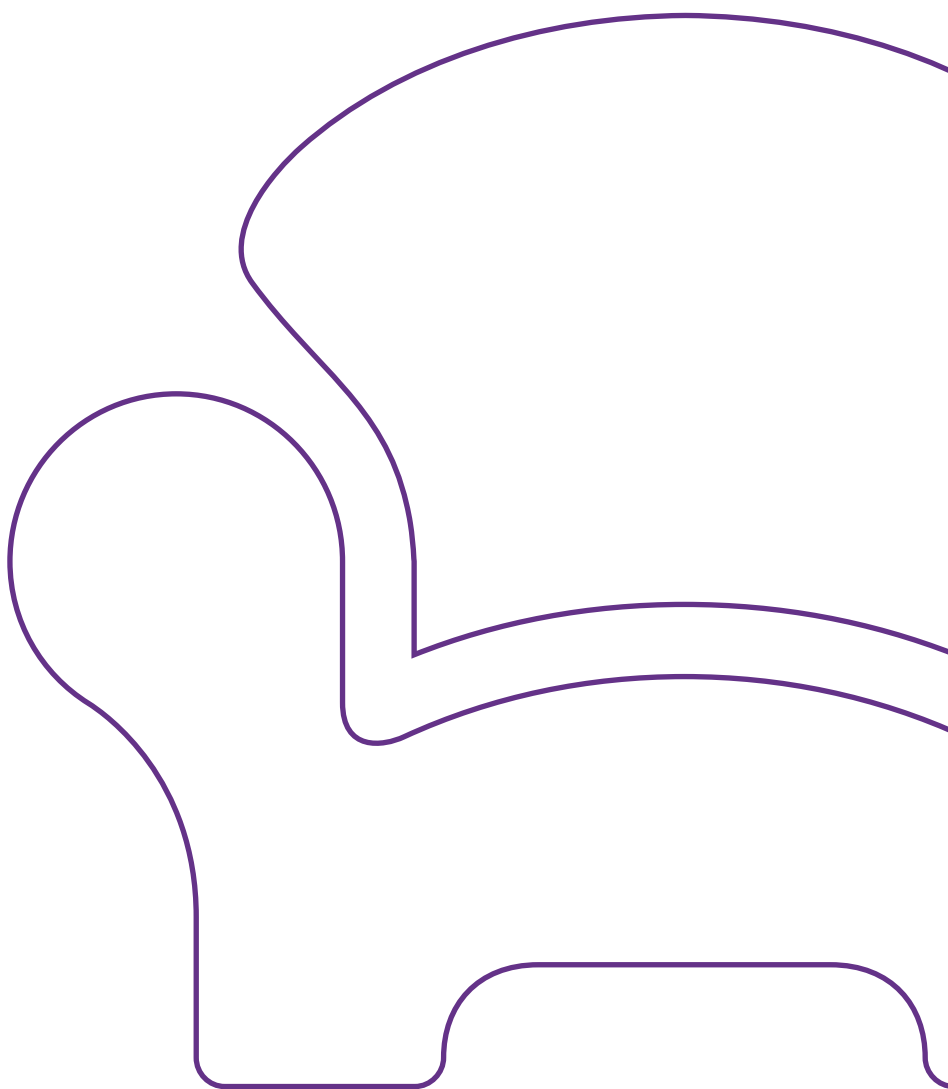
What should you do if you’ve tried some of these remedies and they haven’t seemed to work? Continue to pray about what God would have you do. Try some new ones that you haven’t attempted yet, and give it time. Relationships are built, not conjured into being. Be committed to the building process.

—Erin Brownback; copyright 2007 by Christianity Today

---

---

---



---

---

# ADVICE FROM EXPERIENCED FACILITATORS

---

*Why obedience and a caring heart are all you really need*

---

2 Corinthians 9:12–15

How would you describe the role of a small-group facilitator?

First, a facilitator needs to be obedient considering the 12 disciples. When Christ came and chose the 12 disciples, He didn't pick the most popular people, the most influential people, the people in the know—He didn't even pick the most biblically literate people. He looked for ordinary people willing to do extraordinary things if they'd follow Him. When they followed in obedience He took them to doing extraordinary things.

So a facilitator is someone who says, "I don't have my act together, but I am obedient, so I'm willing." That's an important step because so many times people think, *I have to be a bible scholar before I can lead a Bible study*. But God doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called. And so the primary thing facilitators need to have in their DNA is obedience.

The second characteristic of a facilitator is just someone who cares. That's it. If you care about people and you're willing to facilitate, you can do it.

---

## Functionally, how does facilitation of a group discussion differ from other “teaching” roles in the church?

On a macro level, whoever’s running point in a group discussion—whether it’s a leader, a host, a facilitator, or whatever you want to call them—they need to understand that they are not dispensing information, they’re facilitating transformation. A lecturer or a Sunday school teacher dispenses information—they speak, you listen. But in a group, the facilitator is simply guiding, or shepherding, the people in the group so that they experience life change.

So the big distinction between the roles is: are you dispensing information—which we try not to have facilitators do in small groups—or are you facilitating transformation?

## In your experience, what are some of the biggest challenges that facilitators face, particularly new facilitators?

The biggest challenge for facilitators is staying focused on why the group has gathered together—to grow and develop people. It’s all about people. It’s not about your agenda; it’s not about the great lesson you wrote; it’s not about all of the social things that the group likes to do. It’s about life-on-life learning. So the facilitator has to help the group avoid getting sidetracked by knowing that there are a lot of good things and bad things that can hijack group discussions, but the group has to stay focused on helping people. You’ve just got to nail that one down first.

Another big challenge is fear. That’s one of the biggest forces the enemy uses to stop us from taking a risk. The great thing about fear is that once you’ve taken a risk in the face of it, your faith grows. And that growing faith helps you to face the next opportunity with less fear. You can be scared that nobody will show up for the group meeting, for example. But if

you take that risk and just one person shows up, faith tells you that’s the one person God wants you to spend time with. Or you can be afraid that you won’t have your act together during the discussion. But taking that risk gives God the opportunity to build your faith by demonstrating that He always has His act together.

So there are all kinds of fears that can creep up and try to paralyze us.

## Other challenges for facilitators?

Another challenge we often don’t think through enough is our curriculum diet. When you’re raising kids, you don’t ask them what they want to eat; you give them what they need to eat. In the same way, your group needs a healthy curriculum diet.

Dealing with gossip in the group is another challenge. If you can understand Matthew 18:15–17, a lot of the battles of communication and conflict and gossip can be overcome before they grow. Facilitators need to be able to tell people who are gossiping about others in the group, “Did you talk to the person?” They need to understand that it’s their job to stop gossip and conflict, biblically.

But on that subject of conflict, it can also be a challenge to see conflict as good, not bad. A lot of new facilitators experience conflict and say, “Oh, this is bad. We’ve got to jettison the group.” But in reality, conflict is like a warning indicator in your car that flashes “check engine” or “low oil.” Conflict just means the group is deficient in something. More times than not, it’s communication. A huge bonding moment for groups is successfully working through conflict. As they go through it, they grow through it. The experience makes the group so much stronger.

A lot of the group discussions I've participated in have stayed pretty shallow. Do you have any suggestions for moving things deeper?

In real estate, it's all about location, location, location, right? Well in small groups, it's all about relationships, relationships, relationships. So if you want to move the group deeper, it's going to take relationships. If you want to hold people accountable, it's going to take relationships.

Don't be afraid to do relationship-building activities at the front end of a group. Fellowship is one of the things God has wired us for, and we tend to do it quite well. Building friends builds trust and trust allows people to be vulnerable with others. Vulnerability is the prerequisite to getting past shallow issues and getting deeper as a group. One caveat—groups can get stuck there and not move into deeper waters. Once you've built the relationship capital, you can start going deeper.

Tactically, you can start with the curriculum you study and the tools you use. Americans tend to know more of God's Word than they actually apply. So if you want to take your group deeper, the issue generally isn't how to get more biblical knowledge into them; it's how to get them to act on it.

What are the practical skills that are necessary for a person to facilitate a small-group discussion?

Often it's practical application of the Great Commandment. Love others as yourself. Treat people as you would like to be treated. If you have a heart for people, and can help everyone to get involved, you can facilitate a group. This is especially true in today's age, where video curriculum is so prominent. You don't have to be a master teacher to use DVD curriculum. But if you care for people, you can succeed.

One of the things I like about video curriculum is that it's great for starting a group. I think many, if not most, groups can grow beyond that, and they should. But in a society where people are practically trying to outrun the clock by scheduling their lives full, it's great to have already prepared lessons presented by effective and biblically sound teachers, so that you can concentrate on what you love to do. And when I facilitate my group, what I love to do is be with the people and love on them and challenge them.

So if you've got a heart for people, you can facilitate a group and make a difference in someone's life.

What are the three most important things a new leader should keep in mind?

First, be assured: there is a purpose for you being the group leader. Remember you are doing this as a service for God and know He will empower you to do His work. Second, be prepared. The best way to feel comfortable is to be prepared. Study what you will be covering, prepare the questions and think through how people will respond. Third, pray for the members of the group, that they will benefit in the way God desires. Pray for your wisdom and discernment and for the health and growth of the group.

What are the most important character traits of a small group leader?

Be someone who can speak the truth of the Bible or the subject being discussed as it relates to the Bible in a way that makes it relevant. Be able to relate well with the members of the group. Many leaders are fearful of not knowing the answer to the questions. Saying, "I do not know" is far better than hoping to give the right answer. Following up with the answer at the next meeting shows you care enough to research the answer.

A leader must know how to breathe life into others, have a love or growing desire for sharing God with others, and have a desire to see others grow spiritually. People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. It is also very important to know how to guide discussion by commanding attention rather than demanding it. This is often done in a very gentle style. Remember that the people attending the group are typically there for fellowship and learning, in that order. If they are not enjoying the experience they more than likely will not return.

## How can I contribute to a welcoming atmosphere in the group?

Greet people by name with a warm smile, ask them how they are doing and follow up on prayer requests: "John, great to see you, how's it going...how's your mom doing?" Make sure the room is comfortable, clean, and has food and drink out. Let everyone know they have refrigerator rights. Let people feel your house is their house.

## How can I get the group off to a good start in the first meeting?

Share great food and drink along with great stories. Get people to share and laugh by asking some great icebreakers. Some of the best I have used are, "Tell us about yourself, your job, where you go to church," and, "What was your first job as a teenager and what stood out the most for you about this job?"

Make the first meeting about introduction and going over the discussion/study topic, including a lesson to introduce the topic. If the study is 90 minutes long, spend 30 minutes for social fellowship, 30 minutes in study time, then 30 minutes for discussion. The study time during the first meeting is usually 10 minutes shorter due to having some good introduction questions for the group.

## How much should I talk and how much should I let group members contribute?

Talk less than 25 percent during question and answer or sharing time, being there only to guide. Do not be afraid of silence. Silence will drive others to share. It helps to smile, nod, or just look down in the book or Bible during the silent periods. People will open up and the sharing will take place.

## How can I keep the discussion on track when it wanders?

Say something like, "Great point. Thanks for sharing. Let's see what others have to say about ..." Affirm the person. Offending someone may cause others to avoid sharing, or hurt attendance and growth of the group. Jon Weiner, small groups pastor at Southeast Christian Church, suggests during the first meeting to let everyone know when the leader tugs on their ear, it is time to wrap up your answer or sharing. Do this in a very light-hearted but serious way.

## What if the discussion wanders to a place more fruitful than the curriculum?

Enjoy letting the conversation go where it needs to go. Remember God's ways are greater than yours. People love it, grow from it, and become more involved in the group. This is often when community really takes place and the group as a whole is taken to a new level. The only caution is making sure that when the Holy Spirit has done His job, we get back to the matters at hand after giving thanks for what just happened.

## How do I measure success in my group?

The most important and simplest goal is for the group to grow closer to Christ and one another. It is also a great success if the group meets for more

than a season and develops leaders from within to start new groups. Do not measure the success of the group with too high a standard or expectation. The first group a person leads may be a smashing success and the next not so much. Either way the success goes to God and the work is done for God.

## What has been your biggest surprise as a leader?

People coming to a Bible study for their first time. The questions they ask are typically incredible because they are simply seeking the truth. They are also often intimidated about not fitting in. Treat them no differently than the others. Make them feel welcome.

## How is life balance maintained for facilitators?

It is important not to overcommit, stay ahead and keep organized. Keeping up with everything going on in the lives of the members of the group on top of day-to-day commitments can be challenging. Plan the week and make sure you make time to pray for folks and stay on top of studying and preparing for the group. Having a routine and some level of organization really helps to make this not only doable, but also incredibly rewarding.

## How can I build and keep confidence as a group leader?

Reading the Bible to gain understanding and deepening the relationship with God is the greatest source of confidence building. God is the greatest encourager. It has always been good to have a friend as an encourager nearby. It is humbling to remember you are the one who is not only being led to do this, but you are the person the members of your group look up to and have decided to join. This is a great responsibility and privilege.

## God wants you to be wildly successful.

He trusts you with His children. Be excited about this and know that your confidence comes from the Creator of the universe. He has confidence in you to do His work.

—Steve Gladen; copyright 2007 by Christianity Today

