

How to Lead a Group Discussion

Purpose: To examine the principles of leading a dynamic group discussion and to equip you to use them in your group.

Objectives: By the end of the lesson you will:

1. Understand the dynamics of a group discussion.
2. Know how to prepare for and lead an effective group discussion.
3. Understand how to use good questions to stimulate group discussion.
4. Be able to evaluate their group discussion.

Key Verses: Hebrews 10:24-25

Note to instructor: Share about an experience in which the group discussion did or did not go well. Why did it go well or not go well? If it didn't go well, what could have been improved?

I. Introduction:

In this lesson, we are going to explore how to lead discussion groups. Have you ever led a discussion group? From your experience, what are the essential ingredients in a good group discussion? Take a moment to think this through and jot some answers down.

Now think about the following questions for a while. When would you want to use a group discussion? When would you not want to use it? What are the drawbacks to group discussion? Write your answers before proceeding to the next section.

Note to instructor: Ask for student's feedback to the above questions. Summarize by saying something like, "We use group discussion in the smaller discipleship groups. It would not be good in a large-group, like for a sermon."

II. Understanding the Dynamics of a Group Discussion.

A. Good group discussion is impossible without three key ingredients:

1. **The leader must be committed to having an open discussion.** The group leader has the responsibility of asking the types of questions that will stimulate discussion and draw out each group member. The group leader needs to know the answers, but more importantly, he or she needs to lead the group to discover the answers for themselves.
2. **Each group member must contribute in a positive way to the discussion,** offering input and encouraging participation by others. A passive or overly aggressive group member will stifle discussion. Each group member's opinion is valuable to the group. No one should be allowed to dominate the discussion or intimidate the others into silence.

3. **The whole group should manifest an environment of acceptance.** It should be a "safe" place to express an opinion. The group atmosphere should be one in which no answer or opinion is ridiculed. A wrong answer should be correctly refined and clarified, but not ridiculed, put down and ignored. If the group is to draw out the opinions of each member and encourage the learning process, it must be a "safe" place to speak freely.
- B. There are two main elements on which group interaction is based. They are interdependent and together determine the dynamic of the group discussion.
1. The element of content: The content of the discussion must answer questions and draw conclusions. It must result in application in their lives.
 2. The element of personalities: This includes how easily each member opens up and shares with one another and how skillfully the leader involves the various people.
- C. Benefits of group discussion.
1. It does not require the leader to have public speaking ability in order to be successful in ministering to people.
 2. Members are more involved in interactive learning than from a passive lecture format.
 3. It increases feedback by providing opportunity for further thought, investigation and personal interaction with the issues discussed. Group discussions are likely to produce people with well-thought-through personal convictions.
 4. It increases leadership and self-confidence in those who participate.
- D. Limitations of a group discussion
1. It requires **thorough** preparation on the part of the leader. The leader must know the material well enough to respond to a variety of questions from the group.
 2. It is not the place to present a large volume of material. Spending plenty of time in discussion will limit the amount of time devoted to the leader imparting information.
 3. It requires preparation by all group members. Preparation is essential to avoid sharing their ignorance and biblically unfounded opinions.
 4. There is the danger of "group think". The leader does not take control and allows the group to make the final decision, which may or may not be consistent with the Scriptures.

In what ways is preparation for a discussion group different from preparing for a non-discussion group? How do you prepare for a discussion group? Write down your answers before proceeding to Section III.

III. How to prepare for good group discussion. Good discussion takes **work**. Here is what to do:

- A. Be aware of the needs of your group members. Think through their needs and how the time together can help meet those needs (Hebrews 10:24).
- B. Study your material and plan your presentation.
 - 1. Determine your goals--what are you trying to accomplish?
 - 2. Determine what questions you will use to stimulate extended discussion. Do not ask simple "yes or no" questions, but rather ask those questions that will get group members talking about the how-to's and the why's.
 - 3. Plan (write out) summary statements and application points you want to communicate during the discussion. This will help avoid "group think." You want your group members to apply the word to their lives, not merely answer questions. At appropriate points in the discussion and at the end of the meeting, you will need to summarize the conclusions reached by the group and apply them to life.
- C. Think through possible responses. This will help you be prepared for whatever happens.
- D. Go through the study yourself and try it out. Preparation is the key.

IV. How to lead your group effectively.

- A. Create a good atmosphere for learning.
 - 1. Get excited about the Word of God.
 - 2. Get excited about what they are discovering. Remember how excited you were when you learned these things for the first time? Share in their excitement.
 - 3. Use a "hook" (attention-getter) to begin. A good hook helps expose a need; it answers the question: why should we discuss this topic? Examples of "hooks" can be anything from a short motivational story ending with an unsolved question posed to the group, to an agree-disagree question or brief two-by-two discussions of a provocative question. Refer to earlier class taught: "Teaching Effectively in Ministry Situations - Understanding Hook, Book, Look, Took."
 - 4. Use good questions to generate discussion. Good questions get people thinking. This will be discussed more in section V.
 - 5. Balance the priority of getting through the material with the needs your group members might bring up. Your goal is to relate life-changing material to the lives of the group members, not to merely go through the material regardless of needs.

- B. Summarize the lessons learned and draw out appropriate applications. You want your group to apply the content to their lives, not just repeat it back to you. **The nature of group discussions often leaves the main ideas and applications unclear.** The leader needs to make them clear by summarizing at appropriate times.
- C. Make assignments for further study for the next meeting. In order to have them prepare for the next meeting you will need to work through what the group will do at that meeting and make assignments accordingly.

All discussion groups have problems. What are some that you have faced? How have you dealt with them? Write down your answers before proceeding to section D.

Note to instructor: Ask the class to share what they came up with. Ask for suggestions on how they should be dealt with.

- D. Deal with the barriers to good discussion.
 - 1. **Competing opinions.** The best answer to two opinions that disagree is to find God's answer in the Bible. Often you can deal with this by asking "What do the rest of you think?" If you do not know the solution, look it up and bring back the answer the following week.
 - 2. **Getting off on tangents.** The leader must be the one to get the discussion back on track. Suggest that topics not directly related to the discussion can be discussed after the meeting.
 - 3. **Difficult personalities.** Some people require more patience, wisdom and tact than others. You can limit the response of aggressive talkers by asking, "What do some of the rest of you think?" Or you could direct a question to someone else. (for example if Mark is answering all the questions before anyone else in the group, say "John [or the name of anyone else in the group], what do you think...?") If a person still tends to dominate, talk to him after the meeting. Dogmatic and opinionated group members, as well as passive, unresponsive members, can stifle a discussion. A good idea is to place aggressive talkers next to you. Consider meeting individually with these group members to discuss how they can best contribute to the group.

Good questions are the fuel for good discussion groups. Those same good questions are the oil that keeps the group moving. What have you learned about asking good questions?

Note to instructor: Ask what the students came up with here. Instructor could also mention that Jesus often used questions as a teaching tool. Example: "Who do people

say that I am? Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:13-17) Challenge students to study the gospels and make note of the numerous times Jesus used questions.

All questions are not alike. In fact, some destroy group discussion. Questions are like tools. We need to match them to the desired outcome. Good discussion requires that the students have a certain body of knowledge. Some questions check knowledge, other questions refine it.

V. How to use good questions.

A. The four types of questions:

1. Questions that have only one obvious answer ("**closed**" or "**leading**"). A leading question is one that implies the answer that the leader expects. Examples: "What character quality is Paul speaking of in 1 Corinthians 13?" "Paul was a committed Christian, wasn't he?"

The value of a "closed" question is that it uncovers specific details that the students know and reveals to them and to the teacher what they do not know. It narrows the range of the discussion.

A leading question that can be helpful is: "Do you all agree with what was said?" This is helpful in correcting a wrong answer because the correction will (hopefully) come from their peers instead of the discussion group leader.

Danger: Too many closed questions or leading questions communicate a lack of preparation on the teacher's part and a low view of the students. It can also block discussion.

2. Questions that suggest only a few specific responses ("**limiting**"). A limiting question limits the learners' thoughts to the specific details or thoughts desired by the leader. Students become frustrated as they unsuccessfully try to read the discussion group leader's mind. Examples: "Who were Paul's two main disciples?" "What one verse in the Bible best summarizes the whole Bible?" The value of a limiting question is that it limits the scope of the discussion. It sets the direction and can open up the discussion to more open questions. It does not stimulate discussion but does uncover the facts that the students know and do not know.

Danger: Similar to closed questions.

3. Questions that invite personal opinion, have a large number of answers or no obvious answers ("**open, wide-open**"). An open question allows the group to explore causes, reasons, places, conditions, results, etc., without feeling confined. It does not require a specific number of answers, thus leaving the discussion open to many opinions. Value: It gets to beliefs and values of the students. It helps them develop new conclusions. "Open" questions encourage the group to consider a wide range of possibilities, express their personal opinions and take into consideration the answers of others in the group. This greatly aids the learning process. Examples: "Why do you think Paul disciplined

people?" "What are some reasons given in this passage?" "What does it really mean to 'disciple' someone?"

Danger: With an inaccurate foundation, these questions can lead to wrong conclusions. This can lead to "group-think".

4. Questions from members of the group that the leader asks the group to respond to first ("relay"). A relay question draws the rest of the group into a discussion, after one member answers a question, expresses an opinion, or gives a wrong answer. (It is best used after an open question has just been answered.) Example: "You heard what Tom said about discipleship. Now, what do the rest of you think?" Value of this: Thought and discussion are stimulated. Group members are encouraged not only to consider the opinions of others, but also to think for themselves.

Danger: If not used properly, these can intimidate or embarrass a quiet person. This, too, can also lead to group-think.

Instructor could ask the class, "Since we prefer open and wide-open questions to help lead discussions, give me examples of each." Allow a number of examples to be given.

Perhaps have the students look up a passage (Philippians 2:3-8) and come up with some open questions.

B. Using questions effectively.

1. Think through the specific point each question is to bring out.
2. Be ready to rephrase or ask additional clarifying questions if members do not understand a particular question.
3. **Do not be afraid of silence.** Let the members think through their answers and gain courage to speak.

VI. Application and Close

Think about the last small group you led or participated in. Go to the last page of these notes and analyze the group according to each question. Think about what went well and how things could have been improved. Be prepared to discuss this in class and with your mentor.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the dynamics of a group discussion?
2. How do you prepare for and lead an effective group discussion?

3. How do you use good questions to stimulate group discussion?

Meeting Evaluation Worksheet

As soon as possible after the meeting, evaluate it using the following questions. For the first few times, it will be helpful to make your evaluation in writing.

1. Was everyone at the meeting who should have been there? What needs to be done to contact anyone who was absent?
2. Did you begin and end on time? What is necessary to improve on this?
3. Were you thoroughly prepared for the session? What would enable you to be better prepared for subsequent sessions?
4. What was your goal for this particular session? Was the objective of the session reached in (each member's) life? Why or why not?
5. Did everyone participate in the discussion? Did certain people tend to dominate or be left out of the discussion? What can be done to produce a better balance?
6. Did people open up to share their thoughts, or did you have to carry the discussion? Were you able to draw the correct answers from the group rather than giving them the answers? What could be done to improve this?
7. Did the group get off on unprofitable tangents? How can you better keep the discussion on target?
8. Was the discussion theoretical or was it practical and relative to the lives of the people involved? How could you have better related it to practical Christian living?
9. Did everyone reach the desired conclusions, or did some go away with unresolved questions? Are there people in the group that you should meet with for personal counsel before the next session?
10. What other suggestions can you make that will enable you to do a better job in your next session?