

LEADING YOUR SMALL GROUP

Like many other aspects of Christian leadership, leading a small group is a skill (or set of skills) that you can develop. Consider the following categories to help you reflect on different components of small group facilitation to develop or sharpen your skills.

PRAYER

Praying with your leaders

Pray with and for your small group. Invite the Lord to be a part of decision making: whom to invite, what to study, where to meet, etc. Pray for everyone involved, your leaders, members, and that the Lord will work in and through you! Make time to pray at least once before, during, and after each session. Consider these specific suggestions to ensure your small group is permeated with prayer:

- Meet before all arrive (even for 15 minutes to plan and pray)
- Commit to praying for each guest on a weekly basis.
- Encourage leaders to pray for members between sessions.
- When you first begin, have a new person open and close with prayer.

Praying within the small group

As your group feels more comfortable, ask for intentions and pray for them out loud. Consider gently challenging members to go a little deeper as needed. For example: "We would love to pray for your Uncle Bob, how can we pray for you in dealing with your Uncle Bob's situation as well?" It is much easier to pray for others, but the beauty of a small group is to get to a place of vulnerability and feel able to ask for prayer for ourselves.

As you encourage your group to grow in prayer, consider the following suggestions:

- Go around the group and ask each person if there's anything they'd like prayer for.
- The host should start with a very short prayer; long eloquent prayers may be impressive, but they discourage others from praying.
- Consider a simple prayer like: *"Thank You God for bringing us together, we ask you to answer the prayers we share with you now....Amen."*

QUESTIONS

One of the best ways to facilitate good small group discussion is to have great questions! Depending on the materials you are using, you may have been given questions already. Great! Get to know them beforehand in case you need to reframe a question for someone or pick key questions when you run short of time.

If you are writing your own questions, consider the suggestions below to get you started:

Launching Question - Use to start discussion.

Ex. *“What stood out to you in this reading or talk?”*

Observation Questions - Use to help people recall the reading or talk.

Ex. *“What story did the author/ speaker use to open up this reading or talk?”*

Understanding Questions - Use to deepen understanding of the reading or talk.

Ex. *“How would you state the theme of this reading or talk?”*

Application Questions - Use to help members apply the material to their lives.

Ex. *“How do you see yourself in the story/ talk we just read/heard?”¹*

| *Draft additional questions that could be broadly applied below.*

LISTENING

Small group leaders are called to listen non-judgmentally to members' joys and challenges, offering prayer, support, and encouragement when appropriate.

Pope Francis reminds us that "we need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing... an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur." (Evangelii Gaudium, 171)

Consider the following to foster an environment where members feel heard and are brought closer to each other and Christ:

- Get to know small group members by sharing introductions and asking a casual follow-up question to show you're interested.
- Encourage everyone to participate in conversation. Consider asking everyone to contribute to a more open ended question.
- Don't be afraid of silence! Make sure there is time to process questions and what each person shares.

What other strategies might you use to help your small group members feel listened to and known? Think of an experience when you felt heard and it made a difference for you.

DISCUSSION

Introductions - Introduce yourself to the group then ask each member to introduce themselves. Plan one or two questions ahead of time for each member to answer about themselves along with their name to break the ice and help build familiarity.

Ground rules - Have a brief discussion about the rules and expectations for your small group, encouraging people to listen actively, share freely and respect others without judgment. Consider these examples of "ground rules" you might include:

- What is said in the group stays in the group, unless it is determined that a person is in danger of hurting themselves or someone else.
- When someone is talking, everyone else will actively listen.
- Allow everyone to share by not dominating discussion.

Besides posing questions, guiding sharing and discussion is also an important role of the small group leader. Consider using the "ACTS" model as you guide discussion:

- **Acknowledge** everyone who speaks
- **Clarify** what is being said
- **Turn** the conversation back to the group
- **Summarize** what has been said²

Tips for a successful discussion

Begin and end on time - Respecting people's time will make it more likely they return. If discussion is taking off, remind members they can connect with each other outside the group to reflect and share further.

Be dependable - If you say you will discuss something later, make sure you do. Little things build trust.

Don't be afraid of silence - Give people time to answer. If they have a puzzled expression, restate your question (don't just answer it yourself).

Inject humor - Laughter disarms people and builds bridges. Meaningful discussion often follows laughter.

Encourage group members to be open by being willing to change their beliefs and opinions, being open to new perspectives, and resisting the temptation to argue merely for the sake of argument.

Incorporate emotion - Living our faith is not just an intellectual pursuit. Don't be afraid to talk about feelings and emotions.

Take notes - If a personal issue or interesting point arises in discussion, take note and bring it up at the right time.

Keep perspective - Consider the level of personal disclosure appropriate for the group. The goal of a small group is not to make people cry but to encounter Christ in honest reflection and prayer. If people do share intimate information, remember that all sharing should be kept confidential unless someone poses a danger to themselves or others, in which case report to an appropriate authority.

PERSONALITY TYPES IN YOUR SMALL GROUP

A key to a healthy and happy small group is having free and open discussion with everyone participating equally. And nothing bogs down a great discussion like a know-it-all or an over-the-top needy person. Every group is bound to encounter conflict and distractions. As you train yourself to identify and respond to these personality types, your small group will flow better and accomplish its ultimate goal: drawing people closer to Jesus and to each other.

People rarely derail group discussions intentionally, but there are five personalities frequently found in small groups that can disrupt group interaction unless the leader can handle them smoothly.

Dominators have an answer for every question, and every answer seems to go on forever. Dominators are usually very knowledgeable and kind-hearted. They just don't always have the social skills needed to help you keep things on track. Have the courage to help the dominator wrap things up. One of the best methods is to simply finish the dominator's thoughts for him or her then quickly allow someone else to speak.

What a small group leader can do:

Remember that the group is usually desperate for the facilitator to intervene when someone is dominating. You should begin by working to draw others out. Look for a quick breath, no matter how short, to jump in and invite others to contribute. Dominators aren't the enemy. In fact, dominators will bring profound points to the conversation. Turn dominators into allies by talking to them after the get-together. Compliment the dominator's quick thinking and openness, explain the goals for drawing everyone into the discussion, and ask the dominator to help draw out everyone during future discussions.

Hiders are easy to ignore because they never bother the other group members. In fact, they've become experts at being ignored and missed. Hiders need very gentle coaching and encouragement to start allowing others to get to know them.

What a small group leader can do:

Most hiders feel afraid of speaking in front of groups, so help them break the ice by allowing some sharing in pairs. Mix the pairs up so the hiders have a chance to get to know everyone in the group. Remind the group often that it needs everyone's contribution to grow.

Scoffers have the greatest potential to ruin a small group. Criticism is contagious and it can paralyze an inexperienced facilitator. Remember that, when it comes to scoffers, their bark is always worse than their bite. Their complaints are usually more about their own perceptions and hurts than the events they're criticizing. Don't ever let a scoffer derail an activity, and never take the complaints personally.

What a small group leader can do:

Humor is a great tool for reaching scoffers because it diffuses the power of their complaints. For example, if a scoffer complains that he or she is sick of pair shares, a skilled facilitator might say something like, “We’re doing it anyway, so get ready. For an extra treat, you can be my partner.” With consistent care and nudging, a scoffer can actually become an excited and motivated group participant. If the scoffing is extreme, have an honest conversation with the scoffer away from the group that helps him or her see the effects of the negative comments and how they interrupt your efforts for the group.

Revealers have a tough time knowing how much information is too much information. These members often bring details to their stories that leave group members feeling awkward or unsure of how they should respond.

What a small group leader can do:

The secret to facilitating with revealers is to help them find the proper context for the things they’d like to share. You could respond to a revealer’s disclosure by saying something like, “That must have been very painful for you. That’s the kind of thing we should discuss one-on-one. Let’s talk after the get-together so we can pray about that.” Known for being needy, revealers work best with facilitators who are very direct and very gentle at the same time.

Problem Solvers have a tough time seeing that others are in pain or confusion. With great intentions, the problem solver tries to fix other group members, often offering pat answers and solutions. Remind your group that each of us is in the process of learning and growing and need time to discover for ourselves how God is calling us.

What a small group leader can do:

If a problem solver gives a pat answer that’s received as judgmental or insensitive by a group member, don’t panic. Quickly respond by showing empathy for the person with the problem or question. You might say, “I’m sorry you’re going through that. Keep sharing and struggling forward. We’ll do our best to support you along the way.” If a problem solver doesn’t seem to catch your hints and redirection, talk to him or her after a get-together. Tell the problem solver that you appreciate his or her wisdom. Then remind the problem solver that you want everyone to have the freedom to talk, discover, and even struggle through things.

What are your experiences with these difficult personalities? How did you or another small group leader handle the situations?

FOLLOW-UP AND ACCOMPANIMENT

The process of accompaniment which draws small group members deeper into Christian community and relationship with Christ requires leaders to personally reach out to members before the small group, communicate with them between sessions, and offer appropriate support after the small group has ended.

Consider the following suggestions as you walk with your small group members outside of and after sessions have ended.

- Email the group between each session thanking them for their presence, share any important information, and confirm the date, time, and theme of the next session.
- Send a personal email to any newcomers welcoming them individually.
- Be sure to answer any questions that you weren't able to address during the session either individually or to the group as appropriate.
- Take note of any resources that were mentioned during the session. Send a link or other relevant information to the group in your follow-up email. As members review a video, article, or book someone recommended, it often prompts rich discussion and deepens interactions.
- If your group has a period where it is open to receiving new members, be sure to continue making personal invitations and encourage existing members to invite a friend.
- If a member of the group regularly contributes to discussion, is eager to lead prayer, or has expressed an interest in helping, invite them to consider leading their own small group or consider other leadership opportunities at the parish.
- Encourage participants to gather outside of the small group to continue to grow in Christian friendship (Theology on Tap, holy hour, meet at a local coffee shop etc.).
- Be aware of any cliques that form within the group; encourage people to pair with someone new for discussion, introduce members who seem left out to parishioners you think they might relate to; or even get coffee with those members and get to know them better yourself!

Draft a short sample email message responding to these three group members:

- 1. Someone messages you who saw a social media post about your small group. They are new to the area and used to go to a Catholic Church but haven't been in a while. In their message, they seem interested in your small group but a little nervous.*
- 2. One of your group members who had been consistently contributing to discussion and volunteering to lead prayer missed small group without explanation.*
- 3. You have come the last session of your small group and follow up with the whole group but one member seemed not to really click with the other members and you don't think they are really involved in parish life otherwise. You want to send an individual follow-up message to them.*

QUALITIES OF A SMALL GROUP LEADER

Builds Trust - Accompanying others in the midst of their Christian journey requires building trust. Small group leaders establish trust within their group by establishing healthy boundaries, maintaining confidentiality when appropriate, and fostering an environment where everyone feels known.

- Establish ground rules (and stick to them!).
- Model non-judgmental and active listening.

Self-Aware - As a small group leader your actions and attitudes can have a big impact on the group. Being aware of your own emotional, mental, and spiritual health will help you make more intentional decisions and guide others towards Christ.

- Maintain your own prayer life, frequent confession and Mass, and pay attention to the specific ways you need to grow in holiness.
- Identify your personal gifts and be aware of your weaknesses with the help of a trusted friend, counselor, or strength-identifying tool.

Guided by the Holy Spirit - The Spirit directs all of us on our pilgrimage toward heaven. Good small group leaders take care to allow the Spirit to guide the group in prayer, preparation, and discussion, offering up the success of the group to God.

- Pray that you can lead your group well
- Pray for each member by name and their intentions.
- If something is on the heart of a member or even the whole group, don't shy away. If you're not sure how to address it right away, at least offer it in prayer.
- Assess the direction of the group frequently and in prayer to make sure it stays faithful to its mission.

Joyful - The experience in a small group should be informal, relaxed, and fun. Small groups are an experience of Christian community, not a company meeting!

Avoid intensity and remember this is not therapy. If something of intensity derails the group consider stopping and saying, "Hey, let's pray about that right now," pray, and then go back to the small group. Remember that laughter is a key component of a good small group experience. While you want to encourage people to deepen their relationship with Christ throughout the small group, have fun and enjoy the journey.