

# Facilitating Group Discussion

This help guide seeks to provide practical techniques you can employ to promote fruitful discussion in your group. Although you may have the perfect discussion planned out, you must remember that the Holy Spirit has His own plans for how to shape a person's character. Only He can bring about true change in a person's life. You must therefore hold tightly to the purpose and goal of the group-but hold loosely to the exact questions and conversations you believe are required to get there.

The curriculum provides helpful talking points, but God will direct conversations in ways we could never imagine by using the stories and convictions of other people in the group to stir up deep discussion. He gives wisdom when we ask and don't doubt (James 1:5), but this requires communicating with Him before, during, and after group discussion, and understanding the context, interpretation, and application of the passage before your group meets. Let's look at some skills we can grow in to help facilitate healthy group discussion.

## Skill One: Active Listening

Active listening goes beyond simply hearing someone's words. Paying attention to a person's tone of voice, facial expressions, eye contact, body language, and history as a group member can help you interpret a host of thoughts and emotions. What might a person be feeling if they are fidgeting during a certain question? How can you draw in someone who seems lost in their own thoughts and stares off into the distance? Skilled leaders closely observe the people they serve and ask themselves these types of questions. Even while listening to the thoughts of individual members, continue to observe all group members as much as possible.

Jesus made observations like these by being in tune with the Holy Spirit while observing the actions, words, and body language of others. This skill takes practice and intentionality. Our tendency is to want to look men in the eye when they are talking, as this demonstrates interest and respect. While this is generally true in a group setting, we don't want one-on-one dialogue to occur only between a member and the leader. The members should be engaging with one another! For this reason, you must look for ways to foster discussion between group members by observing their behaviors and finding ways to get them to engage with one another.

When first implementing this new skill, it might feel awkward to be constantly looking around the room. Don't be discouraged. It is extremely helpful to see the many ways people communicate when you are looking for it, since you use this knowledge to impact the flow of a discussion. As you observe different posture, body language, gestures, facial expressions, etc. in your group, you will become a better active listener and be able to facilitate healthy discussion.

## Skill Two: Summarizing

While active listening, it's often easy to determine which members are distracted, processing, trying to formulate a response, or chomping at the bit to say something. When this happens, their brains register only a portion of what is being said. In these instances, summarizing is a great tool to help members and the group as a whole refocus.

Group members often come at a particular topics from a wide range of viewpoints. Some have longwinded answers. Others tell a compelling story with several important points. Sometimes an intense discussion breaks out with multiple people chiming in with opinions. When this happens, people often miss details or fail to recall important points as the discussion goes on, and it may be beneficial for you to jot down a few notes. Thoughtful and concise summaries can help you pull together content and sharpen the whole group.

### Summarizing is particularly helpful when:

- You're starting a new session or book of the Bible and want to review the last one.
- A member has spoken for too long.
- It's time to transition to a new topic or question.
- Many opinions, thoughts, or stories were shared.
- The discussion or meeting time is wrapping up.

### Example of Summarizing at closing:

To summarize, let's talk about applications we said we'd like to implement in our lives. Josh and Cameron spoke about how they want to change their attitude about their jobs. Bob said he wanted to serve his wife with a thankful heart. Someone mentioned desiring to be grateful for his skills and abilities given by God...while Frank and Debbie said they wanted to show more appreciation and love to their kids. Now let's take a minute to think about what an application would be for these convictions. What is one thing you will change this week?

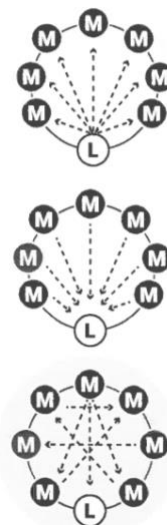
### Skill Three: Linking

Perhaps the most satisfying group meetings are when members are encouraging, challenging, and learning from one another while the leader generally listens and learns. This is the ideal outcome when using the skill of linking, which refers to the process of connecting people together to form bonds and spiritually sharpen one another.

You can use linking to tie together ideas, experiences, or feelings that two or more members share. This is particularly helpful for members who are more reserved and don't often share due to anxiety, feelings of inferiority, lack of commitment, or having something else on their minds. Linking is ultimately helpful because it brings cohesiveness to the group and increases the overall engagement and commitment of its members. Rather than acting like a classroom where students come to learn from the leader, the group becomes a place where men grow in fellowship and holiness together.

This diagram is a helpful way of visualizing the skill of linking.

- **Not ideal:** Leader does all the talking.
- **Not ideal:** Members only respond to the leader.
- **Ideal:** Leader guides and facilitates, but interactions between members dominate the discussion.



Avoid answering your own questions, as that detracts from group engagement. If needed, repeat or rephrase questions until the group clearly understands them. A group quickly changes from eager to passive and silent if members think the leader will do most of the talking. Also, don't be content with just one answer to a question. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" or "Anything else someone would like to add?"

**Phrases and responses to aid in linking include:**

- There seems to be a common theme among the group...
- From what I hear, you two have had a similar experience...
- Sounds like you two agree about...
- I would imagine many of us can relate to...

**Skill Four: Clarifying Statements and Questions**

Although it seems easier to lead when group members actively participate in discussions, an overly talkative group isn't necessarily healthy. For example, if members are adamant to get in their two cents during a conversation, the leader can't ask follow-up questions to someone's comment before another person jumps in. This sometimes creates disjointed conversations and prevents dialogue where the group sharpens one another. You as the leader have a responsibility to both encourage members to get involved and steer the discussion so that it benefits everyone. One of the key methods of doing this is by clarifying vague, confusing, overly negative, or potentially controversial statements. Clarification can be useful when:

- Members seem confused about a particular question.
- A member doesn't elaborate on a vague or evasive answer ("I'm having trouble with..." "It's hard when..." etc.)
- A member shares a story that seems unrelated to the topic.
- A comment is made that seems to go against God's Word.
- A member makes frequent negative or hurtful comments toward himself or someone else ("I'm such a failure..." "That guy is such a jerk..." "My wife always gets on my case..." etc.).

Clarification can benefit you as a leader and the entire group if you observe confusion among the other members (recall the skill of *active listening* as you observe other members' reactions). You as the leader will often make clarifying statements, but it is good to have one or two others in your group in which you can call on to help clarify or contribute as well.

At times, group members will say something that you don't agree with or that seems to go against Scripture. When you need to address a potentially controversial topic or false belief, it is important not to accuse the speaker outright but to ask a question in a way that offers an out or alternative perspective. Give the benefit of the doubt rather than jumping to conclusions and allow the Holy Spirit to direct the group as you facilitate.

If you have tried to clarify and the person is clearly continuing to articulate something unbiblical, you have the responsibility to spell out Biblical truth. Since the goal of Life Groups is to unbelief to belief in the Gospel as it applies to all areas of life, you must help the person and group address this false belief and re-align it to God's Word. While it's best to avoid arguments regarding non-essential issues, as they can potentially divide believers within the group, it is vital to clarify and confront statements contradicting God's Word.

Jesus modeled this aspect of leadership many times, most notably after Peter rebuked Him regarding His declaration that He would die (Matt. 16:22). Although Jesus minces no words with Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" He explains to all His disciples the reason for His vehemence (Matt. 16:23-27). Leaders can learn from Jesus how to stand firm when necessary while using the opportunity to help members of the group grow. Potential phrases to help with clarification could include:

- Tell me if I am off-base...
- Are you saying...
- Can you explain...
- What do you mean by...
- I want to make sure I understand...
- Has anyone else had similar thoughts/experiences...

### Examples:

*Member:* "I have been struggling with being a good dad lately."

*Leader:* "What do you mean when you say you are struggling? Can you explain what a 'good dad' is?"

*Member:* "I think that God helps those who help themselves."

*Leader:* "I want to make sure I understand. Are you saying that God only helps people if they do certain things or are you saying that God helps us as we seek to live out a God-honoring life?"

### Skill Five: Cutting Off

If there is one skill that you as the leader should be prepared to use in every session, it is learning how to effectively cut off members. In spite of its importance, however, cutting off is typically the skill leaders feel the most uncomfortable using. Leaders might avoid cutting someone off due to a natural desire to avoid conflict or out of fear of upsetting or offending a group member. Although cutting off can sound hurtful or controlling, there are many instances when interrupting is necessary to protect the group or move it in a more positive direction. Typical reasons for cutting off include the following situations:

- One person is rambling or storytelling without a clear purpose.
- A member is discussing something inappropriate (gossip, church politics, etc.)
- Someone hijacks the conversation.
- A member is dominating the group time and not allowing others to share.
- Members are arguing in an unkind way.
- Something inaccurate or unbiblical is being shared.

Sometimes there is no easy way to go about cutting someone off, but a few strategies can help this process go smoothly. The first is to time it correctly. You can often recognize when a story, joke, or discussion is getting off topic, and heading off these situations is easier than digging out of them. Listen for phrases like:

- "This might be a rabbit trail, but..."
- "That reminds me of this one time when..."
- "Can you believe....or have you heard..."

It might be beneficial to talk to members who have a habit of making comments like these one-on-one outside the group (or connect with a Pastor to help in having a conversation). If the situation has already taken a wrong turn, you must be ready to jump in quickly. At the same time, make sure you are not interrupting comments, exchanges, or stories that could be beneficial to the entire group. Seeking out feedback from a few trusted members can help you identify if you are cutting off too much or not enough.

Another strategy is to use both verbal and nonverbal cues when you cut someone off. Tone, voice, and body language are important. Your goal should never be to humiliate or criticize members but rather to stop unhelpful comments firmly and gently. Nonverbal cues include avoiding eye contact with an overly talkative member or looking at others while finishing a question to convey that you want someone else to speak. Visibly drawing in a breath or using a gesture to signal that you are going to speak will warn the speaker that you are about to jump in. This may help them realize that they're rambling and result in them cutting themselves off, which is better than you having to do it.

The following phrases or questions can be useful when cutting off:

- If you had another minute or two to talk about this, how would you sum up your response?
- I want to make sure I understand your point as well as get some of the group's feedback...
- Before you go much further, are you just wanting someone to listen, or are you asking the group for help?
- Let me stop you there for a minute. I'm jumping in because...(we're short on time, I'd like to clarify, want to try to get us back on track, I want to ask what does that have to do with our current topic...)
- Hold that thought for a moment; we may come back to it.

### Examples:

*Talking too much:*

*Leader:* "Joe, do you mind holding that thought? I want to get some others' perspectives on this."

*Rambling:*

*Leader:* "Bill, let me stop you for a second. I want to make sure everyone understands your overall point. Can you sum it up in a short sentence?"

*Inappropriate/Incorrect:*

*Leader:* "Before you go into too much detail, James, I want to be careful in this area..." or "That sounds like a very difficult situation, and I would love the chance to speak more about that outside this group (or offline). For now, I think it'd be best (or more fruitful) to focus on the lesson or topic at hand."

*Argument:*

*Leader:* "We're getting pretty heated, guys, and I want to shift the focus for a second..."

## **Skill Six: Drawing Out**

Drawing out is the skill of encouraging people to share their thoughts, which in turn makes them feel like an integral part of the group. Although some have no trouble participating in group conversations, many are reserved for a variety of reasons. These may include being occupied with something else, feeling unknowledgeable, feeling inferior, feeling superior, coming unprepared, being naturally reflective and careful with words, or simply being accustomed to sharing only what's on the surface. For all these reasons, drawing out is a vitally important skill to employ.

You should draw members out early and often during the first few meetings of a group. The longer a reluctant or reserved person stays hidden and waits to make his first contribution, the more reserved that person may become. Early participation also helps build relationships between members because everyone feels like his opinion and ideas are valuable to the group.

### **Methods for Drawing Out:**

Below are some helpful methods for drawing out and a discussion of some of the most frequent reasons people remain quite in groups.

- **Direct Methods**

A direct method of drawing out simply means calling on a specific member to comment or share. You must often put thought into how to do this delicately so as not to alienate that member. Try to frame it as an invitation, not a command. Comments like, "We haven't heard from you this morning. What are your thoughts on this question?" are great in many situations, but you should ask them only after you have first observed the member and their mood or behavior during the Life Group.

Using your eyes can be particularly helpful in drawing people out directly. Focusing on a member when asking a question may encourage them to speak, though looking at them for too long may come across as a spotlight. By glancing at a member for a brief moment, possibly right as you finish the question, you can invite that person to speak without saying anything yourself.

- **Indirect Methods**

Two of the most common indirect methods to draw someone out without addressing an individual member are called dyads or triads. A dyad is when you pair up two members of a group to discuss a particular question or topic (preferably not spouses but members who don't know one another). Or triads, where you have smaller groups of three (or four). In this way everyone in the group gets involved, and those who may feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the entire group still have an opportunity to share.

Another indirect method is using a round. A round is when a leader asks a short question and then has each person around the room share. This forces everyone to comment. Using a round may eliminate feelings of inadequacy, since everyone is sharing together, but this does take more time.

### **Common Reasons for Reserved Members:**

- Members have anxiety about sharing.

Remaining silent in a group is often wise, as Proverbs 17:28 states, “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.” In many cases, however, it isn’t wisdom that keeps a person’s lips closed. Some members remain quiet because they are afraid of judgment from others or because they feel inadequate. Leaders need to use care when drawing out these members, as they can easily feel picked-on or criticized. You can draw these men out by using dyads or rounds, followed by asking for encouraging feedback about their response from others in the group.

- Members are more reflective by nature.

Some members simply take their time to formulate their answer. According to James 1:19, the entire group should seek to emulate these people because they demonstrate a tight rein on their tongue. To encourage these folks to share, it is helpful to ask a question and then ask that members reflect on it for a few seconds or so before answering. Although silence can be uncomfortable, this may be necessary to engage reflective members. An invitation for silent reflection can help discussion.

- Members are occupied by something else.

Occasionally people will be reluctant to share because they have something important on their minds. Though they are present physically, their minds are somewhere else. It is helpful to allow time at the beginning for these men to share what is on their minds so they can then focus on the group. Use active listening to discern when this is the case.

## **Summary for Facilitating Group Discussion**

In review, below are the key points from this help guide:

- Many skills and methods are important for cultivating a vibrant healthy group, but the overall purpose and goals for the group should always dictate the flow of the meeting (not an individual).
- Leaders should listen to the words of members and pay careful attention to body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions as they seek to guide the group.
- Leaders should strive to bring clarity to the group as members share. They should be prepared to clarify and confront unbiblical comments and advice.
- Group members’ relationship and interactions among themselves are vital for a healthy group. Members will be more committed and willing to share if they have lively discussions with one another.
- Leaders must be prepared to cut off members whose answers are longwinded, inappropriate, or dominating. This is vital to an effective and healthy group. Always be prayed up.
- The views and ideas of all members are important for the group; leaders should strive to draw out comments from quiet and reserved members.