

TWENTY TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL SMALL GROUP LEADERSHIP

© 2006, Michael Zigarelli and LifeWay Christian Resources. Used by permission.

There are dozens of books and articles about how to lead a small group, and how not to lead one. Here's a compilation of some of the best ideas—twenty tips that may help you lead your group to a life-changing experience.

Tip 1: It's Not about You. Let's get one thing straight from the beginning: leading a small group study is not about you. It's about God. The more you can remain in the mindset of magnifying God and minimizing yourself, the more others will learn from the study. Take a cue from John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

For some group leaders, this humble posture is quite natural. For others of us, the ego has a funny way of creeping into everything we do. If you find yourself speaking and acting out of concern for what others will think of you as the leader, that's a red flag. Instead, try not to worry about your reputation—about "people-pleasing," in Paul's words (Galatians 1:10). Your job as a small group leader is simply to co-labor with God to help people draw closer to Him.

So, boiling it down to a sentence: to lead a small group with excellence, be the "guide on the side," not the "sage on the stage." This is God's group. Keep Him at the center of it.

Tip 2: Operate in God's Strength. Tip 1 said that successful small group leadership happens when you make the study *about God*. Here's the flip side: successful small group leadership happens when you lead the study *through God*. The best leader is one who's first a follower. Ask God to empower you to lead beyond your abilities, and return to this prayer often. Additionally, make prayer the bedrock of your group time together as well, at the very least opening and closing each session by collectively talking to God.

Tip 3: Operate in Joy and Gratitude. The disposition of the leader powerfully drives the disposition of the group. When you adopt a joyful and celebratory disposition throughout the study, others will follow. When you smile, when you're upbeat, when you're genuinely excited to be leading, when you celebrate successes, it can infect the group, and that will significantly improve the experience for everyone involved.

As you know, though, joy doesn't just happen. It's not something you can engineer on demand, nor fake for very long. Rather, real joy flows from *gratitude* for the opportunity with which God has blessed you. Always be thankful (1 Thess. 5:17) that your leadership of the group is *a sacred ministry*. Joy will naturally follow.

Tip 4: Encourage Accountability. Accountability matters, so we see it in plenty of contexts. CEOs answer to boards. Elders oversee pastoral performance. Accrediting bodies hold schools to high standards, and so on.

Accountability can make a difference in small groups as well. We're more likely to experience permanent change when we have an "accountability partner" who will support us, ask us how we're doing with the study, and encourage our progress. So early on, perhaps suggest that group members walk closely through the study with at least one other person.

Tip 5: Preparation, Preparation and Preparation. The familiar real estate axiom is that the three most important things in a property are "location, location and location." In small group leadership—and in teaching generally—one could piggyback on this axiom by claiming that the three most important things are "preparation, preparation and preparation." There's simply no substitute for it (as some of us have seen from witnessing an unprepared group leader or teacher.)

If you're going to facilitate effectively, map out in detail how you'll begin the meeting, what questions you'll cover, approximately how much time you'll be devoting to each of them, some proposed answers for each question, segues from one question to the next, and a way to bring the meeting to closure. You don't need to become an expert on the subject matter; you just need to facilitate capably. Remember, you're a "guide on the side," and every good guide is thoroughly prepared.

Tip 6: Model the Way. If you want people to listen to one another, then listen closely to them. If you want people to be transparent and candid, then you go first. If you want them to dig deeper to identify root causes of their problems, then model that yourself. If you want them to be accountable to one another, then highlight your accountability relationship. That's obvious, but too often violated: Lead by example, not just by words.

Tip 7: Create a Safe Environment for Sharing. In almost any small group, there will be people who are reluctant to participate. It may be prudent to let that go for a while, but everyone learns more when everyone contributes. So make it safe for them to engage.

For starters, be humbly transparent. Share your struggles. Admit your challenges with the issues being discussed. Be honest about your imperfections and others may feel freer to share their own.

It may also be wise to take a positive, affirmative posture toward every early comment on a topic. That doesn't mean you tolerate heresy, but it does mean signaling that all ideas are welcome and that one doesn't need to be profound to contribute something of value. Consider downplaying disagreements until everyone's had an opportunity to share their initial ideas.

Along the same lines, remain sensitive to others' faith traditions. More and more, people are crossing denominational lines to participate in group studies. If you have an ecumenical small group, seek to understand where others are coming from and minimize the disparagement of other denominational perspectives. Of course, there will be times when it's appropriate to raise and examine these differences, but those discussions should probably be deferred until the group has matured enough to handle that.

Tip 8: Hone Your Listening Skills. There's an old adage that says: "Being listened to is so close to being loved, that most people can't tell the difference." You may have experienced the feeling first-hand. Do what you can to ensure everyone in your group feels it as well.

Concentrate on what each person is saying, rather than thinking about your own response. Rephrase their point when appropriate, so they'll know they've been heard. Use non-verbal cues that indicate you're listening—cues like maintaining a comfortable level of eye contact with the person speaking, nodding occasionally, positioning your body to squarely face the speaker, leaning toward the speaker slightly, and so on. Maybe that goes without saying, but never lose sight of how little things can make a person feel "listened to"—and loved!

Tip 9: Stay on Point. This is the bane of so many small groups. One tangential comment gives license to the next, and before you know it, a series of loosely related remarks has consumed the entire meeting.

Ever been there? You may know exactly what I'm talking about, since this happens with too much regularity. But please hear me clearly: *This is a leadership problem more than a participant problem.* It's your job to keep the group focused and on track, so follow up tangential comments by gently bringing the group back to the

actually question. Everyone benefits when a leader proactively steers the conversation; everyone suffers when he or she does not.

Tip 10: Let Scripture Be Your Filter. One might think we wouldn't have to mention this, but sometimes our filters for right and wrong get clouded, even in Christian circles. Some people use their "experience" as an arbiter of right and wrong. Others use "the culture"—society's rules. Some are pragmatists, basing the right thing to do on "what works."

There are plenty of worldviews making incursions into Christian thinking these days, so when group members offer ideas that are potentially counter-biblical, inquire, kindly of course, whether their ideas align with scripture. Ask them if Jesus did it that way, or would do it that way. Invite them to offer any biblical or theological support for their suggestion. Faithful leaders consistently come back to the Bible as the objective standard.

Tip 11: Listen for Segues to the Next Question. Always know where you want to go next with a discussion. Sometimes you simply have to announce the transition ("let's turn a corner now and look at the next question"), but the meeting flows more smoothly if you leverage natural transition points. Expert facilitators listen closely for comments that connect to where they want to go, and then capitalize on them to seamlessly advance the discussion.

Tip 12: Echo What's Been Said. This is such an essential facilitation technique! From time to time, you'll find it helpful to restate what somebody has just said—to "echo" it for the group. Echoing not only lets the speaker know that he or she has been understood, it also serves to clarify that person's point for everyone else. Beyond that, echoing makes it more likely that the rest of the group will respond to that person's comment, rather than just following with an unrelated comment.

So echo comments where appropriate, and then, since you have the floor at that moment, maybe invite commentary about what's just been shared. The flow of discussion, and its educational value, can improve dramatically.

Tip 13: Connect the Dots. Another way to enhance the flow of discussion is to connect some people's comments to those of others. "So Sherry, you think that the verse calls us to action but Fran, two minutes ago, you said you didn't understand it that way. Can somebody else help us out here?" This is good facilitation because it clarifies where we are with the discussion and where we want it to go.

Tip 14: Cut Off Dominators. Let's face it, they're out there. Some groups are blessed with that spirited person who contributes a little too much. And that can diminish the experience for everyone else. Usually, if the leader doesn't take control of this situation, no one will.

One solution is to talk to the person away from the group. It doesn't take much. Start by affirming the positive and then candidly make your request. "Hank, you have a lot of good stuff to contribute in this study, but I want to make sure that others have an adequate opportunity to share, too. Would you be willing to scale back—at least a little—the number of times you contribute?"

A second way to balance contribution is to cut in judiciously when the dominator takes a breath, echo what he or she has said to that point, so they know they've been heard, and invite someone to respond to that. As an absolute last resort (usually in larger groups), you might say to the group something like: "I don't want you to feel like you're in school, but in the interest of managing this discussion, it would help me if you would slip up a hand when you want to comment." Then regulate the dominator's contributions in a way that's more helpful to the group.

Tip 15: Ask for People's Opinions: "How 'bout somebody who hasn't spoken yet?" "Anyone else want to comment on this issue?" "Does anyone have a different perspective on this?" These and similar questions are non-threatening ways of inviting people into the conversation. Write out some phrases with which you're comfortable and use them at strategic points in your meetings to draw people back in. Sometimes it just takes a little nudge.

Tip 16: Frame Questions Using "Why" and "How." When we ask a question that begins with "why" or "how," people tend to answer with more thoughtful, more extensive responses than if our question begins with "who," "where," or "when." Think about it. Questions that begin with these latter words can lend themselves to one or two word answers, right? But try answering a "why" or "how" question with one word. Not likely. If your goal is to get people talking, think about reframing your questions.

Tip 17: Permit Silence after You Ask a Question: Eventually, it'll happen. You'll ask a question and no one will say anything. Avoid the temptation to fill that void with your own voice. Give people time to think, to muster courage, or to hear from God, if they're attempting to do so. Try to get comfortable with silence after posing a question. Often, your patience will be rewarded with some of the richest, most poignant answers of the week.

Tip 18: Stay With Fruitful Conversation, Even If It's Taking Extra Time.

For group leaders who are especially time-conscious, it's natural to march through a set of questions, diligently ensuring that everything gets covered in the time allotted. The best group leaders remain mindful, though, that *the real goal of the meeting is transformation, not completion*.

Sometimes a question will stimulate lots of discussion. It will go deep; it will touch a chord; it will create excitement; it will surface pains or misunderstandings that need to be addressed. Avoid interrupting what may be God's work in these moments. Don't be a slave to the clock, insisting on covering all five questions in ten minutes each. Some questions may require twenty minutes, others three minutes. So be flexible and learn the art of deviating from the original plan.

Tip 19: Use a Whiteboard or TV Screen, if Appropriate. Especially on complex topics, chronicling the relevant points on a board or screen is an effective way of affirming, echoing, and clarifying the ideas. It will also help you to “connect the dots” across comments. Beyond that, many people will retain more of what's said if they've both heard it and seen it in writing.

Tip 20: Summarize Key Points. Many people will find it instructive when you recap the important lessons from the discussion. The end of the session is a natural time to do this, of course, but it's also helpful at the beginning (“this is what we've covered so far in this study”), as well as after particularly important or complicated points along the way. Brief, oral or written summaries from the leader enhance learning and retention, so take good notes during the discussion and bless the group by highlighting the essential takeaways.

A Bonus Tip: There's No Substitute for Time Invested. If you've read through this entire article, or even just scanned it, this much should be obvious: Leading a group well is a significant time commitment. It's not a matter of glancing at the questions a few minutes ahead of time, arranging the chairs, and then praying that things work out. To facilitate well may require some skill development and even *hours* of weekly preparation, depending on your current expertise. There is simply no substitute for time invested, so step up to the challenge. You are creating an environment where people meet God.