

GroupThink

Small Group Leader Pitfalls, Ideas, Tips & Insights

Small groups are not rocket science. If you've ever been in one, you can probably think of what made your experiences either a blessing or a nightmare. How do we connect with students in a culture that increasingly values belonging over believing? A major challenge for the American church is to deal with a society that is becoming increasingly fragmented and isolated. Here's an example of what not to do....

Small Group Nightmare

"Our well-trained leader promised that eight weeks later we would all arrive at a closer walk with God and with one another.

Sounded promising and hopeful, so we started. By the third week I had had enough. I did not want to return to share my deepest thoughts. I did not want to give obvious answers to predictable questions from the published small group material. I did not want to play one more icebreaker game.

I was not getting closer to anyone. Instead, I was getting angry. This group was expecting more from me than I wanted to deliver. And this group was trying to deliver to me more than I wanted. A church of small groups? Sounded like forced relational jail to me."

-- From *Searching to Belong* by Joseph Myers

Not So Great Small Group Environments *(I'd rather see a movie)*

Nothing but a party

A gabfest of silly human opinion

A dry, tedious academic study of biblical minutiae... HEY WAKE UP

Group therapy with a sprinkling of psychobabble.

Overhead in a community less small group....

"What was your name again?"

"Well, since no one has any prayer requests...."

"Did anyone meet with their one-on-one last week?"

"Well, since no one else is coming, let's just forget it for this week."

"I'm just here for the Bible study; I already have friends."

Barriers to Community

Time constraints/distractions, individuality/self focus, brokenness/past experiences, insecurity, Immaturity, people feel forced to be there, and hidden/mixed motives for being involved.

Reasons why good small groups go bad!!!

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| Getting off track | People don't feel a sense of group ownership |
| Lack of openness | Unresolved conflict/offense |
| Treading water/lack of progress | Key people leave |
| Schedule problems | Fellowship dries up |
| Lack of follow-up | Gossip |
| No outreach vehicle | Leader dominates discussion |
| Leader loses heart & passion for group | Favoritism/judgmental attitudes |

Here's a bunch of things to do and strategies to consider for effective small groups.

What are the ingredients for an effective small group?

Ingredients: Jesus, prayer, community/fellowship, nurture/encouragement, truth, outreach, revelation, worship.

Typcasting

Exploring group dynamics – Learn tricks for interacting with various types of people and how to keep them from destroying group interaction.

The Expert: This person knows everything and wants to talk about it too. If the group feels intimidated by this person, be willing to play the devil's advocate or bring up other opinions.

The Talker: Often first to respond to a question, this person cares more about having the floor and talking than making sense. Teach the talker to be sensitive to the needs of others in the group. Wait for the talker to take a breath and then redirect to others to let them have a turn.

The Silent One: You might think this person is not paying attention, yet they could be the most attentive one in the whole group. If body language tell you that the person seems to be involved, don't worry this person may just be shy. Periodically throw out a question to invite them to participate. Consider asking them in private about their feelings about the group.

The Negative One: A true pessimist, these people feel like they have a giant target around their life. They tend to find fault and blame others. Be willing to privately confront the person in love to help them see their attitude is making things worse. You have to be careful because a negative attitude can kill the group.

The Peacemaker: Fearing conflict more than anything, this person believes that disagreement is failure. They want peace at all costs. Remind the group it is okay to disagree. If the peacemaker tries to intervene to stop meaningful dialogue, privately ask this person to let those conflicts work out by themselves.

The Bomb: Be careful because bombs tend to blow up without warning. This person often feels irritated and stuffs in his feelings. Be ready to give them time to express their feelings if they explode in the group. Let this person know that you are willing to listen and encourage him to share more frequently to keep from bottling up feelings that need to get out.

The Domineering One: This type of person likes to be in charge and take over the group. Allow him to participate but not dominate. Sometimes the dominating nature comes from a true desire to do things right or sheer enthusiasm. Be ready to intervene to keep openness and creative discovery going. Affirm the domineering one and privately explain their actions can be interpreted as rude or insensitive. Encourage the person to focus on listening first. Meet again after the next meeting privately to see what they learned by listening first instead of talking.

The Skeptic: Some facilitators dread these people because they ask tough questions, throw up mental road blocks and can challenge where you want to go. They can also be an asset to get at what others are thinking and to honestly process through basic objections and doubts on an issue. Be prepared to answer and redirect questions. Also, be ready to say that you don't know and come back the following week with more information.

Class Clown: Everyone knows this kind of person from school or church. They want attention and will do whatever it takes to get it. Usually, they love to get the whole thing off track. Make sure you give them some attention. But be sure to direct the group's attention back to the focus of the discussion. Meet with the person privately and give them an active part of the discussion if they tend to shift off focus easily. This will help them stay focused and make them feel a vital part of the success of the group.

Learning Strategies

- Stealth learning – learn by doing or play
- Try something unique, novel
- Repeat things that are important
- Engage people where they are
- Use ordinary life to explain spiritual realities

Insights & Tips

- First things first. Start your process by praying. Listen to hear what God wants you to do and who He might want you to invite to the group.
- Consider making prayer a priority not something you leave to the last few minutes.
- Make people feel welcome from the initial invitation to the weekly interaction. The initial gatherings set the tone for how people will look at the group. First night apprehension is normal, but this attitude shouldn't linger.
- Establish ground rules about commitments, confidentiality and expectations. Make sure that students know you cannot guarantee confidentiality in situations where students may hurt themselves or someone else by their actions.
- Hospitality – Have someone separate from the facilitator host the event and provide food or games.
- Get to know the starting point for group members and what they are expecting from the group experience.
- Manage the unspoken rules and make sure that they don't shipwreck your group.
- Leaders should model openness and honesty. If you aren't willing to be real, why should the group members?
- Deal with conflict, don't avoid it. Conflicts may be opportunities for healing if handled in the right way. Try to listen, reach a godly conclusion and resolve any standing problem among group members.

- Bad experiences cause people to pull away. Many people shy away from small groups because of bad experiences in the past. They think it either didn't work or were hurt by someone betraying a confidence.
- Greater levels of commitment may not make people feel more connected. It can actually do the opposite if people over commit or pledge loyalty out of a sense of duty. People may show up without their real heart being there.
- Small groups are only one tool in a kit full of ways to build community. Small groups are not a magic bullet.
- Belonging happens when you identify with another entity...Belonging need not be reciprocal.
- Joseph Myers wrote, "There are many who consider themselves part of the community of faith until they are confronted by someone who tells them otherwise."
- Not every relationship will be the same. Not every relationship will be personal or intimate. That would not be healthy or something we could hold up for long.
- Myers also wrote, "Announcing programs that promise intimacy to every person within reach creates unrealistic expectations. Worse, it actually pushes those who are not ready for such relationships farther away." – The answer is to be realistic and disarm unnecessary concerns.
- Community happens spontaneously. You can create fertile ground for it to grow. But you can't truly make it happen.
- Going too far....when do we try to become too intimate? This can backfire and cause others to shut down. People are searching for those who will care for them, but at an appropriate distance. People may want anonymity, but they do not want to be strangers.
- Too many people can hurt the effectiveness of a small group. 8-10 is too many. 3-5 may be the best number.
- Sometimes we need to give free space. We all experience times when we want to suffer or process through our feelings alone. Good leaders are sensitive to those needs.
- Many people feel guilty because they don't experience God the way others do or claim to. They wonder what is wrong with them. This can push them away from God and Christian community.
- Don't dismantle small groups if they aren't working. This is not the first but the last step. Instead, consider some prayer, strategic changes to your approach.
- Be available and deal with major problems outside of the group. Keep in contact with group members throughout the week as much as possible.
- Prepare in advance because you can always go with the Spirit, but you can't prepare well on the fly.
- If you have a set vision for the group, make sure that people you recruit are willing to buy into where the group is going. You need to meet people where they are at and let people go if they are not ready for the direction that God is taking the group.
- Some group members can make it difficult to stay focused and have meaningful experiences. Be ready to redirect the focus if necessary. See the typesetting section for specific suggestions.
- Be willing to take a break if the group seems like it needs to stretch, relieve some tension, or just go away for a second to regroup.
- Sometimes you just can't redirect the discussion. In those instances, ask everyone to stop talking and listen as you summarize the discussion. Then close the meeting or move on to another activity.

- Be creative! For example, take a group on a prayer drive where you stop to pray at various places. Take your group on a field trip that reinforces your discussion focus. If you want to talk about homecomings, you could take them to meet soldiers as they return from overseas. If you wanted to talk about having childlike faith, you could take the group to a park and discuss the lesson on a play ground. If you want to lead a discussion on worship, ask the group if they would want to write a song together. Consider going out to hold your discussion under the stars or possibly even a public place. The possibilities are limitless.

About the author: This resource was put together by Chaille Brindley. It may be freely copied or transmitted to others as long as the original wording is not changed and it is not sold or included in any work that is sold. For more information, visit www.organicfaith.com or e-mail chaille@organicfaith.com.