



Small Group Discussion Leadership Manual



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INTRODUCTION

Small group discussions are a centerpiece of youth and young adult ministry programming and it is critical that those responsible for facilitating these discussions are properly equipped to do so. This manual will provide you, the small group leader, with a general overview of the purpose of small groups and best practices for achieving fruitful conversations that yield practical, life-changing results.

THE PURPOSE OF SMALL GROUPS

The primary objectives of small group discussions are to facilitate an encounter with Jesus through deeper discussion about program content, honest self-examination in a trustworthy environment, and relationship building between participants.

Facilitate deeper discussion about program content

Small groups typically follow presentations by ministry staff, retreat leaders, or guest speakers. It is critical that small group leaders are active listeners and participants in this programming, both for the sake of your own understanding and to set a positive example of engagement for students. Consider taking quick, brief notes when the speaker says something that strikes you or seems especially relevant to any of the small group questions you may be provided ahead of time.

Though this purpose may seem self-evident, it can be a temptation for small group leaders to turn the forum into a “second talk”, lecturing opinions and wisdom at students instead of generating discussion amongst them. Your job is to facilitate and moderate group conversation, not provide additional content!





Provide a trustworthy environment for honest self-examination

Quality content alone does not guarantee an engaged dialogue as many participants have barriers of trust and self-consciousness to overcome. It is critical that you create a loving environment where it is understood that participants can speak freely with an expectation of confidentiality, where thoughts that are expressed may be pushed further through deeper questioning but will not be met with condemnation or harsh rebuke. Small groups must allow for the expression of messy streams of thought to be effective spaces for self-reflection and growth, and a shared understanding of the expectations of confidentiality from the small group leader(s) and participants are vital before the group can begin.

Confidentiality means that group leaders and group members will not share conversations from the group with people who were not part of it. However, there are some things that confidentiality does not cover, and small group leader(s) must be transparent about these issues:

1. All youth workers (including volunteers) are mandatory reporters. If you learn something about a minor which may be considered abuse or neglect, then you are a mandatory reporter to contact social services and notify them within 24 hours of learning the information. A parish or diocesan employee should also be informed so that they can take the appropriate action of who else needs to be notified.
2. You can never promise confidentiality from their parents. You can promise that if you learn anything about a person that is worrisome, you will always respond 100% in care for what is best for them.

Make sure to familiarize yourself with your program or parish's reporting and notifying procedures. The VIRTUS online portal has state specific resources as well.

If you suspect that someone is about to overstep appropriate boundaries of sharing, follow the action steps listed later in this booklet under the subsection "Moderate boundaries of appropriate sharing".

Build community and relationships between members

The social nature of small group discussion (as opposed to one-on-one discussion or self-reflection through journaling) creates opportunities for relational connection and community building. It is common for self-conscious participants to open up after seeing that their thoughts or struggles are not unique to them. You may even see your small group start group chats for future accountability and support long after your program's conclusion!

SMALL GROUP LEADERSHIP

The primary functions of the small group leader are to set the “house rules” / expectations, establish the small group culture, and facilitate and moderate the conversation. You will find these roles broken down further below, as well as how to respond to common challenging situations you will likely face at some point in your groups. The list of house rules below is a baseline list of expectations that are helpful to communicate before you begin. Make sure to check in with your program manager (e.g. stakeholder, youth minister, young adult coordinator) to ensure that you are both on the same page with the scope and purpose of the group, as well as to respect any additional house rules or expectations they may want to add.

Setting House Rules

Small group leaders should communicate the expectations of the small group and run through the group’s “house rules” before kicking off the first conversation (and re-iterate as needed throughout).

Rule #1: “Cold Calling”

Let your group know that you may ask participants for their thoughts and feelings to make sure everyone has a chance to participate and engage. By “cold calling” on participants, you 1) check for a deeper understanding of the content from participants other than those eager to answer, 2) create a culture of accountable engagement, and 3) give yourself a pacing tool that allows you to push the conversation forward. This does not mean that you must always push the conversation forward – it is often appropriate to give participants comfortable and respectful time for contemplative silence to process initial thoughts prior to sharing.

This practice can be extremely helpful when administered appropriately. For this kind of “cold calling” to be effective, it must be predictable and affirming. It is NOT a “gotcha” tool for disengaged

participants; it is a transparent means of keeping participants engaged and involved. Make sure you communicate this to your group ahead of time and follow through consistently and appropriately.

Rule #2: Speak for Oneself

Requiring speaking in the first person is an effective way to improve the reflection within your group by changing the language your participants use to express themselves.

Consider the following examples:

“Society pressures young women into unrealistic standards of beauty.”

“It’s really easy for you to feel like you’re not good enough.”

“I wake up every day feeling like I will never be pretty enough.”

There is a clear progression as each statement becomes more personally meaningful simply by shifting the language and perspective. The first statement is a criticism of culture that does not actually tell us how it impacts the speaker. The second statement is more personal, but it keeps the issue at arm’s length. It is in the third statement that we finally see how the participant truly feels.

This “house rule” may surprise your participants with how difficult it is to implement. (The second statement in the second-person point of view is the default mode of expression for many). Expect to see their comfort zone challenged when they have to say “I feel...” instead of “You might feel like...”.

This is a rule worth implementing early and reinforcing often in your small group. Use your best judgment as to when is appropriate to kindly, quickly, and tactfully interrupt a speaker to remind them of the rule, and when to let a stream of consciousness flow.

Rule #3: Give Feedback, Not Advice

Effective dialogue from you and amongst participants ought to take the form of feedback, not advice. This feedback should encourage and challenge other participants to go deeper on their own.

Consider the following example responses to Joseph, a 21-year-old, after he shares the trouble he’s been having feeling like he’s living a moral double life between his bible study group and his new girlfriend’s friend group:

“I think you should dump your girlfriend as soon as you get home from the retreat.”

“From what I’ve been hearing, it sounds like when you’re hanging out with your girlfriend and her friend group, you don’t act like the kind of person it seems like you really want to be. Why do you think that is?”

In the first example, the leader (or another participant) offers a direct, actionable recommendation to try and solve his problem for



him. This is inappropriate because it jeopardizes turning the small group into a council of problem solvers and critics, risking participants becoming dependent on the advice of others and failing to grow and individuate themselves. It can also lead to unwise, overreaching advice sending someone into a worse situation than before and shattering trust in the small group sharing and support alliance.

Effective feedback points out inconsistencies between beliefs and behaviors. Small groups can be extremely effective at vetting attempts at rationalization and tactfully calling it out. Consider the second statement in the context of a young adult sharing about how he feels like he has to “put on a face” around his new girlfriend and her friend group, saying and doing things he would not otherwise. He may attempt to rationalize this behavior (e.g. “I’m trying to get in with the group so I can evangelize them”) until group feedback points out the inconsistencies between his goals (virtuous living) and his behavior. This approach empowers him toward freely chosen personal growth, done by him, for his own sake.

Example Script for Kicking Off a Small Group:

Here is an example script for articulating the purpose of the small group and its house rules. Feel free to put this into your own words!

"Before we get started, I want to run through the goals of our small group and why we're doing what we're doing. The goal of this small group is to get conversations going about what we hear in the talks this weekend – I want to hear about what you guys are thinking, I'm not here to lecture you! Our small group is a condemnation free zone. I want you all to start thinking about the other people in the group like allies and teammates working together to make each other better. As the saying goes, "iron sharpens iron", and the more engaged you guys are with each other in this, the more you'll get from it. Before we start, I need to lay out our "house rules" and expectations for how this group is going to work:

First, it's my job as the small group leader to make sure everyone has a chance to participate and share, which means I may ask people to share if they haven't been able to yet. This isn't a "gotcha" tool like a teacher that goes out of their way to call on someone falling asleep in class – it helps me make sure everyone is able to contribute, and it helps keep everyone engaged and the group moving forward. That being said, I want to give you all the time and space to think and process, so you can expect some quiet time throughout for you to think where I'm not going to pick on someone for an immediate answer. Silence is okay!

Second, we have a rule to "speak for oneself". That is, we share our thoughts without assuming anyone else's or speaking for them. We're also going to speak in the first person using "I think..." and not "you think" or "some people think". This one might take a little

practice to get down, and that's okay! I think you'll be surprised at how much a focus on your language and perspective will help you dig deeper into processing the talks and sharing your thoughts.

Lastly, if you would like to comment on what someone else has shared, we give each other feedback, not advice. Good feedback could be affirming something tough they've shared, asking a question to help them dig deeper (without being accusatory), or responding to something someone said with your own thoughts and feelings. Telling someone what they should do or how they should feel can take away from their own processing and make them feel unheard.

Does anyone have any questions about the small group or any of the rules?

Awesome! Let's go ahead and kick things off with a prayer and then we'll get started. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit..."





Establishing the Group Culture

Small group leaders are critical living testimonies to the joys of being Catholic. The bearing with which you present yourself, how you demonstrate patience and compassion through active listening and the ways you encourage their growth with care all contribute to the culture of your group.

A Culture of Joy

Self-reflection and vulnerable discussion can be painful - but you have the power to demonstrate the process as a short-term means to an end of joy and freedom! Regular, affirming comments can go a long way in easing participants into the sharing process (though be careful not to overdo it and thank every single person for everything that is shared). Affirmations do not necessarily have to be thanking participants for sharing; simply affirming that their feelings are valid (e.g., "That sounds like that would have been very hard for you") will also inspire further confidence and comfort.

Opening each session in prayer will also allow you to take a pause and center yourself in the infectious peace and joy of God. The opening prayer often gets taken for granted, but it is a

powerful way to set the tone for your small group in two foundational ways:

1. **Calculated disengagement:** Prayer helps to move your group away from the distractions of their personal lives and align their minds and hearts toward a place of openness.
2. Prayer allows the small group leaders to call upon the Holy Spirit to act within the group and allows you (the leader) to submit yourself to a Wisdom beyond yourself. This sets the tone for the small group session as one that is surrendered and attuned to God and reminds all present that He must be the focus. Even beginning with the sign of the cross is a simple reminder of the mission we are under. If public prayer on the spot isn't your strong suit, consider these options:

Traditional prayers: Pray a Hail Mary and invite her to intercede for you and your group.

Call upon the Holy Spirit: Ask Him to help each person in your group to call to mind each of their distractions and leave them at the foot of the cross.

Litany: Starting with the Litany of Trust or Litany of Humility is a great way to get your group involved in the opening prayer through active participation.

A Culture of Honesty

A small group that fosters an environment of honesty can spend less time hunting for contributions and more time discussing them. A common pitfall for small group leaders is feeling the need to be an aggressive apologist for the Church when participants express views, frustrations, or disagreements that run contrary to Church teachings. But this does not have to be so; effective small group leaders validate feelings without necessarily validating opinions.

Affirming sharing through further questioning (but not interrogation!) can continue to demonstrate your belief in them. Questions like, "What is that like for you?" help participants dig deeper and understand or express themselves more fully. It is not the appropriate duty of the small group leader to attempt to fully internalize and understand all the emotions of all their participants; rather, it is simply believing them that is sufficient and often more authentic.

Consider the following example:

Maria, 29, is in a womens' small group and shares the following: "I really didn't like that speaker. He kept saying "thank God" for everything good that happened to go right for him, but how does he even know that was God and not dumb luck?"

Small Group Leader 1: "Yeah, I thought he was kind of preachy and boring too."

Small Group Leader 2: "I don't think that's a fair thing to say. He told his story and we as Catholics believe that God provides us with grace and blessings."

Small Group Leader 3: "Thanks for your honesty! Do you get generally frustrated when people say "thank God" for good things? Tell us more about that."

In the case of Small Group Leader 1, the attempt at empathy may help Maria feel directly understood but offers nothing to move her forward and misses the deeper thoughts he's having. Appeals from empathy can be a powerful tool for helping participants feel validated, but small group leaders must be mindful to not over share on-going personal issues in a way that helps participants rationalize continuing problematic behaviors or beliefs. When in doubt, only leverage your ability to empathize with issues that you have worked through and resolved.

In the case of Small Group Leader #2, the immediate rebuke will shut down future honest sharing from everyone else in the group, and the "discussion" will become relegated to going around in a circle and participants giving "the right answer". Aggressive condemnation and correction without first coming to understand them also runs a very real risk of fueling resentment and anger toward the small group and Church at large.

In the case of Small Group Leader #3, Maria has an opportunity for further sharing of her life situation as the leader invites her to think more deeply about his frustrations and to share them. Maria may not have realized this is a pain point for her, or she may have been waiting to unleash a deluge of thoughts and feelings on the subject.

It is more important in a small group setting that you listen and sympathize before you attempt to catechize. Effective small group leaders use catechetical correction sparingly and quickly to clear up any glaring misunderstandings, then resume the small group without allowing it to devolve into debate or argument.

Facilitate & Moderate

Once the formalities of setting up the small group have concluded and the conversations have begun, your primary role shifts to that of a referee. Here are some key foundational guidelines to keep your groups on track and get the most from each session:

Speak often, but briefly

Small group leaders should speak often, but briefly. Appropriate small group intervention often takes the form of the following:

1. **Building bridges and connections between participants** *"You know Sarah, I feel like that's very similar to what Jess said a few minutes ago."*
2. **Watching participants' body language** and, without applying undue pressure or shame, asking them to express their thoughts or reaction to the group. Teens may be better served by not calling outward attention to the body language you've observed, given the burden of self-consciousness they already carry about their appearance, behaviors, and quirks.
3. **Helping a participant articulate a thought** by putting the idea into words and asking, "Does this sound right?" Be careful to not insert yourself uninvited too quickly into their thought processing, and always ask if they could mean to be saying something else – never put words in their mouth.

"Tell me if I understand this correctly – it sounds like what's bothering you the most is that the Church is supposed to be a beacon of truth and joy, but the Christians at your parish have been toxic toward you, and the contradiction has made you doubt how the Church could have the truth if the people are so nasty. Do I have that right?"

4. **Affirmations**, especially for participants who seem anxious about sharing. *"I appreciate you opening up about that – that must have been a tough thing to share."*
5. When applicable, it may be appropriate for the small group leader to close out unfinished business from previous sessions. Even at retreats or camps, a powerful or intense small group session may be cut short, and it may be worth it to revisit for closure. *"At the end of our last session, we ran out of time as Kristen and Annie were sharing some deep feelings – would you like to continue that conversation?"*

Engage the group amongst itself

One of the surest ways to judge the health of a small group is to see if participants are engaging one another directly or if the conversation is a disjointed series of one-on-one interactions with the small group leader. Tempting as it may be to be the font of everlasting wisdom from which your participants line up to get their fill, your duty as the small group leader is to create a free-flowing conversational environment between group members with you only stepping in as needed. Think of a family tossing a frisbee around at a picnic, where it flies freely from one person to another.

Moderate boundaries of appropriate sharing

Sometimes content being discussed will lead to sharing that hits viscerally close to home for some of your participants. You are not equipped nor expected to take on the role of a therapist (and even if you are, it is inappropriate to act in that capacity in a small group setting). Though small groups mirror certain aspects of group therapy environments in that they promote personal and spiritual growth through collaborative sharing, discussion, and community building, they are not appropriate platforms for working through severe traumas.



As the small group moderator, you will need to redirect the conversation if it ever turns towards issues that would (or you think could) trigger mandatory reporting (e.g., thoughts of harming oneself or others) or if a participant begins over sharing and divulging issues related to presently unresolved traumas (e.g., past abuse, substance abuse) or other issues that would require the aid of professional counseling.

A participant that says, "I am struggling with depression and anxiety" is appropriate – a participant that changes the topic of discussion to their anxiety and depression is not.

If you find yourself in a situation where you must assert your authority as the small group leader to pause the speaker and bring the conversation back in-bounds, follow these steps:

1. Affirm the speaker for their willingness to share and be vulnerable.
2. Let the participant know that their topic is outside the scope of the small group discussion, and if possible, let them know that you can or will follow up with them immediately after the small group.
3. Inform the program/event organizer of what was shared in case further action must be taken.

Consider the following examples:

Becca, 22, shares in her girls group that she has been struggling with bingeing and purging. The small group leader takes note and is ready to reign things back in if necessary – but Becca follows up by telling the group that her friends have found her counseling and things are getting a little better by the day. The small group leader takes note of this new information, affirms Becca for her willingness to be vulnerable, and continues to keep the conversation moving along.

Ryan, 27, shares in his mens' group that he has been feeling depressed and anxious. A few minutes later, as someone else is sharing, Ryan adds a thought of his own, then pivots the attention of the group back to him, where he shares that he has been feeling actively suicidal in the last week, and he isn't sure how he's going to get through another month like this. The small group leader quickly and firmly regains control of the conversation, affirms Ryan in his suffering, and tactfully informs Ryan that he has been heard, believed, and that he will follow up with him after the small group. As the group concludes their discussion, the small group leader spends a few extra minutes with Ryan to hear him out further before informing him that appropriate program / event staff will be notified to help connect him to the best professional resources in as timely a manner as the situation requires.

Every small group ministry, youth ministry, retreat, or other ministry program should have an emergency plan for situations like these. Make sure to speak with your respective program leader(s) before you lead your first small group so you understand what they are.



Participant Challenges: “The Chatty Kathy”

When one of your participants takes up an inordinate amount of group time sharing, it is likely the result of one of the following:

1. They do not have a firm understanding of the purpose and expectations of a small group discussion. Some people may hoard the spotlight by trying to process out loud without seeking feedback or input from others, as if they are answering to a teacher and not engaging in conversation. (A tell-tale signal this may be happening is if you have participants that only look at and engage you when they speak, and not the group at large). It may be helpful to reiterate the purpose of small groups with the full group, especially if there is rampant “quiet complicity” with the situation to dodge participation.
2. They are seeking validation from the small group or the small group leader. A tell-tale the speaker enough to show them you care, then redirect the conversation elsewhere to demonstrate that they are not the center of the group.
3. Perpetual filibustering is their way of coping with the emotional stress of the topic or sharing in general. In this case, interrupting their monologue and affirming them for sharing may come as a great relief!

Participant Challenges: “The Sound of Silence”

Participants who do not engage in the group conversation are communicating a message to you just as meaningful as ones who are. Silence, discomfort, and body language must be read and understood, as it can provide critical clues that the participant may struggle to connect with their inner self or with others. Younger participants can be especially prone to defiance or feigning disinterest as a coping mechanism.

Remember that silence is only as awkward as you allow it to be. Participants, especially younger ones, will mirror the confidence and calm that the small group leader presents in moments of uncertainty or silence. If you are comfortable allowing for deeper reflection and pause in silence, your participants will adapt quickly.

Use times in silence to observe your group and their body language, since silence typically means one of the following:

1. Participants are processing the content / question.
2. Participants do not understand the question (and everyone is too afraid to ask!).
3. The material is sensitive, and everyone is waiting for someone else to share first.
4. Participants who speak English as a second language may require more time for inner translation, especially if the topic is very emotionally charged.

If you need to break the silence to move the group forward, you can always ask your group if they need more time to think or if you need to repeat or rephrase the question. You will quickly intuit when your group is processing deeply, and when they don't understand your question (but are too afraid to ask!).

Tips for Co-Leadership

Many programs have two leaders co-leading their small groups. Co-leadership is not radically different from solo leadership, but you will want to mindfully manage the dynamics of co-leadership. When properly leveraged, these dynamics can provide benefits that will strongly enhance your small group's experience:

Co-leaders are equal in authority, unequal in everything else. You and your co-leader must be a united front – but you are likely vastly different people with unique personalities, talents, life experiences, etc. These differences offer more

opportunities for your participants to connect with you and reciprocally more experience that can connect with them.

Emulate the behavior you want to see from your group. Effective co-leaders must model the communication and joy between each other that they want to foster in their small groups. This means demonstrating healthy, kind, and regular open communication between each other.

Alternate opening & closing sessions. This will help reinforce that you are a team of equals and not senior/subordinate.

Discuss your group outside of sessions. Immediately after a group session, you should meet with your co-leader and discuss what happened. Your co-leader may have picked up on things that you did not (and vice-versa). This meeting should take place immediately after the conclusion of the session while the experience is still fresh in your mind.





CONCLUSION

It would be more accurate to describe small group leadership as a set of skills rather than a single skill. This set of skills can be improved upon over a lifetime without ever achieving total, complete, and perfect mastery of the craft. Be patient with yourself as you discover your style, your strengths, and your points of improvement.

Thank you for taking on the role of the small group leader! We hope this booklet has provided you with an initial foundation to begin your small group leadership or given you new techniques to take back into your groups.

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