



FACILITATING DISCUSSIONS IN YOUR GROUP

HOW CAN I MOST EFFECTIVELY LEAD MY GROUP?

DO'S

Use guiding comments such as:

- “That’s a good point.” Without overdoing it, genuinely acknowledge the idea.
- “Could you elaborate?” or “Tell me more about that.” If appropriate, paraphrase back what you “think” you heard and let them elaborate.
- “What do the rest of you think?” or “Who has a different point-of-view?” Engage other perspectives; generate healthy contention and a vigorous discussion.

Do maintain eye contact and keep engaged. Be Present. Demonstrate that you are listening.

Do create a “Zinger Free Environment” Reinforce the idea of “No zingers”. “Zingers” are usually derogatory in nature and can stifle trust and support. When they do pop up, leverage them. Typically, they are ways of telling the truth to someone, usually cloaked in humor and banter.

Do manage a healthy level of conflict. Have people share and “own” their feelings on issues and about each other. Have them stress how they feel and are choosing to respond, rather than attacking and blaming another person.

Do let team members finish talking. Engage the rest of the group to not “talk over” each other.

Do let there be “dramatic pauses”. Wait at least several seconds (up to seven) for a response when you’ve asked for answers or discussion and no one is replying. Sometimes, they need time to formulate what they want to say.

Do take chances and risk your vulnerability. Actively and non-defensively seek feedback. Be courageous in exposing your challenges and confronting your fears. Take conflicts head on dealing with them quickly and directly. Don’t avoid them, they will only fester.

Do take full accountability. When something’s not working the normal reaction is to blame participants, rationalize and justify. Own it - focus on what you are doing to contribute to the problem and what you can do differently to correct it.

Do **BE IT** - a role model for others to look to. Not a “perfect” model, rather a model of a fallible human being. The challenge is again, not to do it perfectly or “right”, rather to do it wholeheartedly and make plenty of courageous mistakes. Demonstrate the capability of learning quickly and adapting, demonstrating responding in new, more productive ways.

DONT'S

Don’t talk too much or impose your ideas on the group. Remember that you are there to facilitate, not lecture. As a rule even when presenting, participants should be talking twice as much as you do. A good gauge is the facilitator speaks 30% of the time with the group taking the other 70% of the time.

Don't try to be the "expert". In fact, everyone respects the person who has the courage to say, "I don't know the answer to that, but I will find out and get back to you".

Don't try to do it all alone, ask for help. It acknowledges that you are human too - that you don't always have all the answers. You may be amazed at the expertise within your group. Let people get involved in the process. Think about roles like; time-keeper, prayer request recorder, social coordinator etc.

Don't put team members on the spot by calling on them unexpectedly.

Don't try to give the "right answer" try to ask the "right question". Think of the group as a think tank, your job is to ask the question. Their own "right answer" will be infinitely more compelling and relevant than any that you could offer.

Don't be a victim of time. Don't make "time crunches" their problem. Avoid statements like "gotta rush", "too much to do" and "we're running out of time". Adjust internally with your course corrections and externally have a "grace under pressure".

Don't end a group in a rush with loose ends hanging out. Participants closing experiences cast a shadow back across the whole group meeting. A poor closing can diminish a wonderful group meeting. Participants need to walk away with a sense of completion. (endings need to be positive and compelling, relaxed and ahead of schedule, and relevant with a clear path forward).

"WHY ASK QUESTIONS?"

It's important to understand why you're asking questions. Remember, the key to facilitation is "Asking the right questions", not "giving the right answers".

1. **To Discuss** - to examine various options. For example, "Can anyone give other ideas around this?"
2. **To Verify** - To ask for support for a statement. For example, "Can you give me some examples of how this has worked for you in the past?"
3. **To Analyze** - To have someone explain in more detail. For example, "Carol, what does all this mean? Can you tell me more about that?"
4. **To Review** - to summarize. For example, "Would someone be willing to recap the discussion?"
5. **To Explain** - To clear up misunderstanding of a subject. For example, "Jim, would you take us through how you did that, one step at a time?"
6. **To Classify** - to organize. For example, "Mary, can you make sense of this and help us see how it fits into the big picture?"
7. **To Illustrate** - To get examples, to simplify or clarify. For example, "Chuck, give us an example of how it works."
8. **To Compare/Contrast** - To identify similarities/ differences. For example, "How will this approach work as compared to how we've traditionally done it?"
9. **To Define** - To ask for and provide definition. For example, "Linda, what does that mean?"

HOW DO I ASK EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS?

Use a variety of types of questions.

General Question: This type of question is directed to the whole group. For example, “What resonated with you the most from this section of scripture?”

The positive of a general question is : no one person feels singled out and everyone can be involved in the conversation. The negative of a general question is you may not get an answer or you may sit in some awkward silence until you get to the answer.

Use general questions to:

- Get more people involved
- Relax the group in discussion
- Slow down the pace

Direct Question: This type of question is directed at a particular person. For example, “Jen, how have you seen this happen in your life?”

The positive outcome of a direct question is the person will answer you and open the discussion. However; the person may feel, “on the spot” and not have an answer. And when you ask a direct question to someone in your group, the rest of the group does not have to think about the answer.

Use direct questions to:

- Gain control of the conversation if someone is “overtalking”
- Get specific individuals engaged in the conversation.

Open Questions: This type of question is open in nature and requires no right or wrong answer. It is usually one that the entire group can openly respond to. For example, “Would anyone be willing to comment on their experiences with the study this week?”

Open questions usually result in lots of participation and there is no wrong answer. Open questions can lead to getting off topic so try and keep the conversation focused on the main points from the study.

Use open questions to:

- Get more participation
- Give the group opportunities to share

Return Questions: This type of question is one that is redirected back to the person who asked it. For example, “Frank, what’s an interesting question and there are many ways to look at that situation. What’s been your experience?”

Return questions allow participants to reflect upon their question, to see if they have some ideas about it themselves. However; If the participant truly doesn’t know the answer they may feel awkward responding and think you are avoiding the answer. Help them get to the answer without telling them exactly how to handle the situation.

Use return questions to:

- Assist the participants in thinking through the desired outcome and coming up with the answer themselves.



Relay Questions: This type of question is redirected to another person in the group or the entire group. For example, “Julie, asked which aspects of the reading were most challenging to implement. Sammy, I think you have discussed this before, what challenged you with this topic and how did you process through it?”

Relay questions keeps all participants actively involved and it calls upon the expertise and experience of other people in the group, other than the leader.

Use relay questions to:

- Increase group participation
- Involve people who might have the information or expertise but , for whatever reasons, are not participating.
- Acknowledge the expertise that is in the group and to take the focus off the leader.

Checking Questions: This type of question is used to monitor the individual’s or group’s understanding of what is going on. For example, “Does this make sense to you? Are there any loose ends out there or any questions?”

Checking questions allows the leader to determine whether the participants understand the discussion of the group content. This also allows time to ask clarifying questions for anyone who has them. Make sure you allow time to ask the checking questions and give clarifying answers. Over time if you find there is always a little confusion after you’ve discussed a topic you may need to address what is happening in group and provide more clarity in the discussion time.

Use checking questions to:

- Check for understanding and verify the group is ready to move on.
- Gather information from the group to see where it stands
- Check the status of the group.

WHAT ROLES CAN I PLAY TO ASSIST MY GROUP?

Summarizer - If there is confusion before going on or before ending summarize the content so far. Use statements like:

- What I hear you saying is.....
- Let me review where I think we are....

Encourager - If someone has ideas but is not speaking up, encourage them. Use statements like:

- Tell me more, can you give me an example?
- You’ve had experience with this, what do you think?
- I think Julie was trying to say something.
- We haven’t heard from you in awhile. Do you have any thoughts on this?

Clarifier - When there seems to be confusion, clarify the conversation. Use statements like:

- Let me make sure I understand what you’re saying.
- What I hear you saying is.....

Procedure Setter - When you feel like the group has gotten off track you can go back to planning your next step. Use statements like:

- Here is one way we can go about doing this.
- Why don’t we try to.....



Idea Builder - When you add some of your thoughts to the topic of conversation it increases the opportunity for the conversation to keep moving. Use statements like:

- Let's put some thoughts together and carry this a bit further.
- I'd like to add to your idea.

Consensus Tester - When you need to come to a consensus regarding a topic of conversation use statements like:

- Do we all agree on that?
- Does anyone have reserve about this decision?

Climate Manager - When energy is down and discussion is not moving or when energy is scattered and discussions are getting off topic, Use statements like:

- I'm feeling.....
- Why don't we take a short break.

Timekeeper - When you need to make sure everything gets accomplished during your group you can use statements like:

- We only have 30 minutes left and I would like to discuss.....
- We have a lot of good content to get through today, so let's get started.

Manager of Differences - When group participants do not agree on a topic you may need to step in and use statements like:

- I can see we have some different opinions in the group. I am glad we can respect each others differing opinions.
- It seems we agree on ____ but not on _____.
- I am not sure we can resolve this now, let's move on to the next topic and we can circle back on this after group if necessary.
- Can you tell me what in your experience leads to that opinion?
- Can you tell us why you feel that way?
- What steps can we take to resolve this before our next meeting?

Fact Finder - Sometimes you may have to sort facts from personal truths. Facts are the rational assessment of what is actually going on in a situation without personal perceptions or judgments. Truth, as we are using it, is an idea that someone believes in. Personal truths are subjective (feelings, attitudes, assumptions) not objective (specific, measurable, observable). Use statements like:

- What are your perceptions about the situation?
- What feedback did you get from the situation?
- If someone else was watching the situation unfold, what would they tell us?

HOW DO I HANDLE DIFFICULT SITUATIONS IN A GROUP?

Quiet and unresponsive group

Allow time for group members to warm up. Try asking non-threatening questions, ice-breakers that are easy to answer. For example, "What do you want to get out of the group meeting today?"



If you can't move past a point

If group members keep talking about the same thing and it's time to move on, thank them for their participation and how much they have contributed to the conversation. Set aside some time at the end of the meeting to pick the topic back up or talk about it the following week. However; if you feel the discussion is valid, keep the discussion going. Be responsible with time but be flexible. Focus on the outcome you are working to achieve rather than being driven by the agenda.

Strong Personalities

Sometimes we have some strong personalities in our group that really want to argue their point. Thank them for their contribution and encourage them to see the other persons point of view.

Uncomfortable Group

Let's face it, starting a community group can be weird. You sit in a room with a bunch of people you don't know and then you are supposed to share your feelings. Take time to acknowledge the awkward, be real and human. Share a story of when you felt that way in a group to help ease the tension and set the example of vulnerability from the leader.

For more information on group dynamics and tips on leading conversation in your group check out:

[Ground Rules for Healthy Groups](#)

The above information was revised from "Facilitation Guide" by James Moore / JMP, Inc.

