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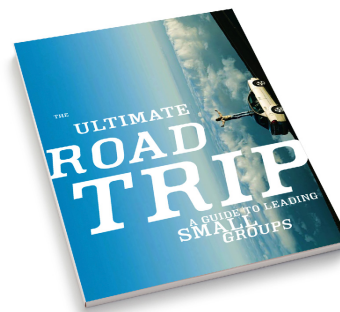
HANDLING DISCUSSION PROBLEMS

THE ULTIMATE ROADTRIP LEADING SMALL GROUPS

The health and success of a ministry is hinged directly to the health and success of small groups. Our ministry is comprised of the building blocks of small groups. Considering the importance and complexity of the task it is disturbing to reflect on how little training small group leaders actually receive. And that is where this resource fits into the ministry.

The Ultimate Roadtrip was written to communicate all of the subtle, and not so subtle, nuances of leading a small group. It covers content, group dynamics, atmosphere, vulnerability and questions that help create a life-changing community.

Chapter Topics: Lesson Preparation, Lesson Content, Creating Community, Groups With a Purpose, The Right Questions, Facilitating Life Change, Common Roadblocks and Problems, Incorporating Outreach, and Qualities of a Successful Group Leader.



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CHAPTER 9



*MANEUVERING THE
POTHOLE*

9.1 TOP TEN DISCUSSION PROBLEMS

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The crash of a small group discussion can be ugly. You may wonder what made you choose to lead a group. Leaders often struggle with the unexpected because they don't anticipate difficult situations and are unsure how to respond when they arise. You need to prepare for certain surprises. This chapter will examine some of the most common problems which come up in small groups. You've probably encountered most of them before, or if you haven't, you likely will in the near future.

9.1

TOP TEN DISCUSSION PROBLEMS

1 Dead Silence

"My group is totally silent after I ask a question. It's as if these guys have taken a vow of silence."

- If the question was good, relax; people need time to think. After some prac-

tice and getting to know your group, you'll find it easier to detect whether they're silent because they're thinking or because the question is a bomb. If you can't tell, ask, "Does what I'm asking make sense?"

- If the question wasn't good or just seemed to miss the point, ask one of the backup questions you've prepared to rephrase the question. For example, you asked, "Who do you have trouble forgiving?" and the group is silent. You aren't sure whether they are thinking about it, or scared, or didn't understand the question. You could ask a backup question such as, "Is there anyone you hold a grudge against? Would anyone like to share an example?" Remember to use open questions (see Chapter 8). Closed or limiting questions will silence anyone.
- Whatever you do, don't fill the silence with preaching. Feel free to contribute, but keep your own answers to a minimum and work on asking good questions.
- Choose learning activities directed toward their needs (see Chapter 8). Are you studying something that interests them? Are you presenting material which intersects with their lives?
- Encourage them with your nonverbal communication. Maintain good eye contact. Smile. Be relaxed. Lean toward the person speaking as you listen. Nod your head as you listen.
- Encourage them with your verbal feedback: Acknowledge and affirm each speaker with a non-judgmental response such as, "Thanks for your input." Compliment appropriate answers with responses like, "Excellent insight" or "Good thinking." Convey acceptance. Don't judge. Express appreciation when people grasp new ideas, express feelings or ask questions.
- Call on individuals who look like they have something to say.

2 A Wrong Answer

"The biggest problem I have is when someone gives the wrong answer. I just kind of sit there with a nervous smile and go, 'Uh ... Err ... Umm.'"

- Use discernment. Determine if it's a wrong answer or just a perspective different from yours.
- Be gracious and gentle. Don't get flustered.

- Redirect the question to another individual or to the rest of the group. Say something like, “Does anyone else have a different perspective or anything to add?”
- Refer the group back to the passage and use questions to guide them to discover the truths in it.
- If it’s an off-the-wall response, say something like, “That’s an interesting thought. How did you come to that conclusion?” Lead them to the truth gently.

Note: At times it may be necessary to briefly give the correct answer if the group is unable to: “I can understand why you might think that, but...” For example, if someone strongly asserts the Bible is full of errors you can’t simply move on to the next question.

- Use wisdom in determining which errors to handle in a group setting. It’s best to avoid certain discussions in the group. For example, an erroneous comment such as, “God helps those who help themselves,” can likely be corrected by the group. Furthermore, discussing this misconception is likely to be good for everyone in the group.

However, be wary of a comment like, “The Bible doesn’t prohibit homosexuality. In fact, most scholars think David was a homosexual.” A possible response might be: “What passages have you read in the Bible about homosexuality? (Expect silence.) I don’t want to chase that topic now, but I think if you read the passages for yourself you might conclude differently. I’ve got some information I can get to you.” Then meet with the person individually.

- Exclude the inappropriate answers when you are summarizing.

3 *Disastrous Distractions*

“Every week in the middle of group some distraction always comes up. Usually the phone rings, someone comes in for a book, or everybody wants to leave early for a TV show.”

- Ask whoever lives in the room if they can let their answering machine get the phone, or if they would be willing to unplug it.
- If all else fails, meet somewhere that’s less distracting.
- If the group continually has schedule conflicts, re-evaluate the group time. For instance, if all freshmen have calculus tests every Tuesday, Monday night is

probably not the best time for a freshmen group.

CAUTION: If you need to permanently move your group time, do so. But don't begin to move it every other week because someone has something come up. Soon no one will know what time to come, and everyone will feel like group should be moved for them.

- Whatever the interruption, don't lose your patience. If you get exasperated or angry, you'll cause uneasiness in your group and only make it worse.
- If necessary, put a sign on the door. Be creative and not dogmatic. For instance, "BIBLE STUDY...KEEP OUT" is not what you want to communicate. Something like, "Bible study going on 7-8 p.m. Feel free to join us," might work better.

4 *The Difficult Question*

"The other day one of the guys asked me if Christ was going to come before the tribulation. I've read Revelation, but I'm not a Bible scholar."

- Admit you don't have a good answer, but tell them you'll look into it. Then ask someone older in the Lord, like your pastor or a staff member, if they know the answer or have the resources for you to study this yourself.
- Ask them why or what they want to know. It may be something they're only slightly curious about. You don't want to put hours of work into finding an answer someone is not really interested in knowing.
- It could be a great question for them to research and bring back to the group. They will learn more if they do the study themselves. You might need to give them some materials to get started.

5 *Can't Finish the Lesson*

"All the women in my group have such a good time together that I can't get through a lesson." This might happen for a couple of reasons. One, the members of your group like to talk, share, and joke around and it's hard for you to even get to the study, or two, the members of your group have so much to say about each question that you can't get through them all.

- If the basic problem is that they like to talk and share too much at the beginning of the group: Set some guidelines from the very start. Let them know

JERRY LOSES IT

One of the men in my group, Jerry, was a competitive, feisty character. He was leading his first freshman group in a lesson on how to be filled with the Spirit. About the middle of the lesson some non-Christian friends started rolling a manhole cover around on the concrete slab outside the room where the Bible study was meeting. It made a deafening roar, interrupting the group just like his friends planned. Jerry wasn't amused. The noise continued and Jerry lost it. He stormed out of the room and threatened to beat up the guys who were doing it. Then he coolly returned to leading his lesson on the Spirit-filled life.

CHIP'S DILEMMA

I was in a group with an emotionally wounded guy who dominated prayer, even to the extent that he prayed about things others had already prayed for. He prayed so long that others would open their eyes and look at each other, not knowing what to do.

there will be sometimes you'll just get together to share, play, and get to know each other. But the central purpose for your weekly time together is to spend time learning from God and His Word. So if they get carried away talking you can say, "OK, it's time to get back to learning from God and His Word, so let's get into the study."

Be careful with icebreakers. Keep them moving and don't let them eat up a lot of time, unless you've already allocated a large block of time for one.

- If the basic problem is spending too long on each question: Try to pace yourself. Prioritize your lesson. Allot a specific amount of time to spend on each section. For example, you might spend ten minutes on your introduction, twenty-five minutes in the biblical passage, and ten minutes discussing application. This will help you know when to move on. Don't be afraid to say, "This is all good, but we need to move on." Prioritize questions of greater importance and spend more time on those. Note which ones you'll omit if you are short on time. Encourage brief answers so more people will have time to speak.

NOTE: Some discussions are so profitable you won't want to move on. When that happens, be flexible. Choose an appropriate place to end the lesson on time. Next week you may want to pick up where you left off or move on to a new lesson.

6 The Non-Stop Talker

"I really like Dan, but he just talks and talks and talks. The other guys try to say something, and Dan interrupts them. Or it's like a ping pong match—they say something; then he says something. He dominates the group. Just once I'd like to see the other guys talk without a return volley."

- Direct your questions to other members in the group: "Let's hear from some of you who haven't had a chance to say anything yet."
- Sit next to the person and minimize eye contact.
- If it's still a problem, ask for the talker's help in drawing out quiet members or privately ask him to keep his answers to a minimum. No one wants to initiate this conversation, but if you let a bad situation go unchecked, it will hurt everyone in the group.



OK, you've looked through this whole chapter, and your problem isn't among them. Maybe someone always shows up late, or people just don't show up at all no matter how many times you remind them. Or after several weeks, you've reached a point where you don't seem to be progressing. When you don't know what to do, pray. Ask God to give you wisdom and bind your group together in love. Pray also that He would create a hunger in them to continue to grow. This might be a good time to get some feedback from those in your group. And of course, you can also talk to your staff member or discipler about what to do. There's a sample evaluation you can use to get feedback from group members in the appendix. Whatever happens, don't get too stressed. Every great group has had its share of discussion disasters.

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7 The Silent Member

"Whenever I'm with Tracy alone she's a chatterbox, but get her in a group, and it's hard to get her to say a thing."

- Ask direct but low-risk questions a shy person could answer comfortably. For example, "Tracy, I'd be interested in your thoughts. What are your thoughts on what we've been talking about?"
- Sit where you can maintain good eye contact with those who seem reluctant to speak out.
- Give positive feedback when the shy person does respond to encourage further responsiveness.

8 Going Off On Tangents

"I don't know how the guys did it but we started off talking about prayer, and before long we were talking about what sports we played in high school. These guys seem to have the spiritual gift of tangents."

- Try to be diplomatic and reflect an accepting attitude.
- Use a good question to put the discussion back on the right track.
- Say something like, “That’s an interesting topic, but since today we’re focusing on _____, let’s talk about that. If we have time later we can come back to this topic.” As you gain experience, you’ll learn when it’s time to try to bring a group back to the subject.
- Jokingly say, “Well, speaking of our identity in Christ...” when the tangent is far removed from the actual topic.

9 *Disagreements & Conflict*

“These two women can’t agree on anything, whether it’s about guys or which of the Gospels tells the most complete story of Jesus. They’re going to kill each other by the end of the semester.”

- Don’t let disagreements rattle you. Often they can aid in learning.
- If two people disagree on a certain point, it may be profitable to talk about the two opinions. It makes group members think and encourages interaction. Say something like, “This is good. It means both of you are thinking. Let’s look at both of your ideas and see if we can sort out what the Bible says.”

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CAUTION: Whether it’s appropriate to discuss a disagreement depends upon the subject. For example, if two people start arguing over the platform of the Republican Party, you wouldn’t want to delve into either opinion because it won’t help your study of God’s Word. On the other hand, if two people are disagreeing whether James 2 and Romans 3 contradict each other, you could pursue both sides for the group’s advantage.

If a disagreement persists that you don’t want to address in group, say something like, “You guys might want to carry on that discussion after Bible study. Let’s look now at the focus of our study today.”

- If a disagreement is a matter of personal preference, sometimes it’s best just to move on. You can say something like, “I suppose we all have our opinions on that,” and continue the lesson.
- If two group members regularly bicker, you might need to talk about it with each of them. Remember, problems won’t just go away.

10 Leader Answering All the Questions

“My group members are always asking me what I think. Then I end up telling them, and I feel like I do all the talking.”

Rather than tell them the answer, help them discover it for themselves. Use questions to help them get their focus back on the issue. Here are some ways you can respond when someone asks you a question you want them to answer:

- Direct another question to a specific person in the group. “Judy, what are some things Paul says about love in this passage?”
- Reverse the question back to the person who asked it, “That’s a good question, Steve. What do you think?”
- Relay the question back to the whole group, “That’s a good question. What do you all think?”

CONCLUSION

You can eliminate most small group discussion crashes by planning and preparing well. Work hard at knowing your group members’ needs. This will ensure your discussions are relevant and will help you know how to respond.

Learn the art of asking good questions and using learning activities to involve the entire group. Learn to trust the Lord with your efforts. A good sense of humor will usually help—something just about always seems to come up. Over time you’ll be able to tell some great stories of things that happened in groups you led.

FOR THOUGHT / DISCUSSION

1 *What is your greatest fear concerning what might happen when you are leading a group? Go ahead, say it. What is a good way to deal with this if it occurs?*

2 *How would you deal with the following situations:*

- *You've just asked a question you thought was brilliant, but now you realize it wasn't even understandable. Blank stares greet you everywhere you look.*
- *One of the men in your group says he wants to watch a Final Four basketball game during group next week. Everyone else seems to agree.*
- *Someone in your group has just begun to vigorously assert that if you don't believe in a "young earth" theory of creation you aren't a Christian. Everyone is on edge.*
- *You're leading a lesson on forgiveness and one of the women in the group starts crying.*



How to Discourage Your Group Members

"Hey, Judy, are you fanning yourself, or have you still not found 1 Corinthians?"

"Good, Troy. That would have been the right answer if I'd asked a different question.

"I like your Bible, Candy. I didn't know they made a Precious Moments' Bible."

"Larry, how did you come up with so much to say this week? I thought you'd be worn out from last week."