

The Art of Conversation in Small Groups

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Facilitating healthy interaction in a small group dynamic is an art. Our natural instincts may be to speak up when there is silence or if someone doesn't have the correct answer, we may want to quickly correct them. But in a small group setting, as leaders, we want to create an environment where people feel safe, invited, and heard so they can discover for themselves what God has to say in His Word and through each other. In preparing for each meeting, it's important to pray, seek the Lord for His will, then lean in and trust His strength and direction. We want to create an environment that gives people freedom to speak and go deep but still guide the conversation.

Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Philippians 2:1-4 (NIV)

Based on recent group surveys the following points surfaced as key requirements to create space for participants to grow in their relationship with God:

1. **Seek God first and model trust.** Be open with your group about how you are personally seeking God, confessing unbelief, and asking for greater obedience in what God is doing. Your group members often look to you as an example and it's often easy to neglect your spiritual life when you're busy, but we encourage you to be intentional with God in your own journey with Him and to share those experiences with others.
2. **Be transparent.** You set the tone for those around you. If you choose to not be vulnerable, other group members may not feel the freedom to be honest. Be willing to share aspects of your story when it seems helpful for others to hear. We encourage you to be transparent, creating a positive environment for everyone to share.
3. **Listen, but also lead.** When members are vulnerable, it is a tremendous risk that needs to be honored. Protect them by not interrupting and instead empathizing. You do not need to speak or pray after each person shares. Avoid lecturing, rather point your group member back to truth.

Four Tips to Implement the Art of Healthy Conversation

1. Encourage discussion – don't teach or preach

A healthy leader is others focused. As a shepherd, your role is:

- to set the climate or tone
- to direct the flow of the discussion
- to encourage interaction
- to lead the group in an understanding of the material

We want to establish an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance. We may not agree with a person's view, but we can respect them as a valued group member and listen respectfully to their ideas. *A servant leader helps people self-discover the truth in God's word that sets them free. It's NOT our job to fix people or convince them to see things the way we or our church does.* This is especially important as many of our groups have members from different cultural and church denominational backgrounds.

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2. Guard against being the one with all the answers

As a shepherd you create an atmosphere where each person shares what the Holy Spirit is teaching them through God's Word. Group participants need to feel safe to ask their questions and not feel foolish. Consider starting off with a simple question such as selecting a question or section from a recent discussion that they found most challenging or confusing? Give your group a few moments to think about it or time to review their notes/handouts (if available). *If no one is brave enough to go first, be ready to occasionally step in with an answer.* As the leader, being vulnerable and honest signals a safe place where we don't need to have it all figured out, giving permission to others to share. Also, *to ensure answers are centered around biblical truth*, as you begin to identify people in your group with an understanding of Scripture, call on them to offer insights from the Bible regarding the topic.

3. Call on your group members by name

Sometimes this is better than asking for a volunteer to answer the question because:

- It is common that the same small number of people volunteer
- You may discover that some members in your group only answer when they are directly called upon

This is also your greatest tool for maintaining control! You can encourage shy participants while keeping the talkers from dominating. Call on the quiet members early in the discussion because when they have participated and been affirmed, they find it easier to speak up. Occasionally someone will ask to not be called upon. Honor their request, but as you observe them, try to include them in ways they feel comfortable. ***The best discussion is one in which everyone participates.*** You want to encourage natural interaction between group members. This takes time to develop as well as patience. Eventually you will not need to call on hesitant group members as much because they are speaking up in response to one another. *But you're the leader, so if the group becomes chaotic and the quieter ones are not participating, step back in and take control. You are responsible for the flow of discussion and time management.*

4. Control your own talking

Don't be the first one to answer your own questions. *Make it a rule, and even tell others ahead of time, that you're going to try to be the last person to answer the question.* Let them know you're comfortable with awkward silence if they don't have anything to say at first. This encourages people to answer and not wait for you to give them an answer. Use prompts, questions, and seek feedback to encourage and support participants as they contribute and get involved. *Remember facilitating group discussions does not mean you need to do all the talking. Aim for providing your responses to questions only where needed and if/when a Biblical perspective is needed.*

(Contains material adapted from *New Doors in Ministry to Women* by Sue Edwards & Kelly Mathews and other sources)