

Solving Common Small Group Problems

Common Leadership Difficulties

BURN OUT

Make sure you're being refreshed by God Himself, seeking Him for your needs. The bulk of burn out comes from not seeking God continually—His presence and power is our strength.

Learn to do what God is doing in His power instead of doing everything in your own strength (there is a great energy drain when we get "up" for meetings).

Learn to discern when to say "no." Your identity doesn't come from meeting every need. Don't accept guilt when you simply haven't time, energy, or skills to meet every need.

When you say "no," provide alternatives. Suggest others in the group who can help, call the church office for pastoral help, suggest a book or tape, etc. Know when to call for reinforcements.

Relax and enjoy the meetings! You're not performing for an Oscar. Don't try to please and keep people—just love them. Only lead meetings you yourself would love to go to.

Play more personally and play more with the people in the small group (at least every six weeks).

Recruit, train, and deploy workers to share in the ministry. See part of your job as replacing yourself as much as possible.

Encourage your members to take advantage of the Sunday morning prayer team to minister to some of their needs.

Take a night off from your small group meeting every now and then (once every two months), releasing a potential leader to facilitate that night.

Re-evaluate priorities: Are you doing too much? Should you let something go? Possibly the small group itself? Learn to give your time to the "Davids"—the committed people with servant hearts who will stay with you.

FEELING UNABLE TO MEET NEEDS

Good! You are! That keeps you in a place of seeking God and of taking risks.

Don't accept responsibility for the health of others. Only God can ultimately meet needs, and people won't grow up in Him and get well until they accept responsibility to seek Him for themselves.

Participate in available training (leadership training, seminars, etc.)

Become more disciplined in your use of time of study (less TV, more studying the Word and seeking God). Use books, tapes, and other helps, especially those recommended by people you respect.

Communicate any needs to your Coach or Small Group Pastor.

CHRONIC PROBLEM PEOPLE

Keep your heart pure towards them—use the steps of forgiveness. (One of the greatest hindrances to their freedom is the resentment and rejection of leaders.)

Accept, but lovingly “control” the mentally impaired. Don’t be afraid to give them strong boundaries.

Confront privately. They must see that they are loved and accepted, but they can’t dump their hang-ups on or dominate a group. Lovingly tell them that if they will enter the process of appropriate behavior in small group, attend Saturday or Sunday worship, and receive counseling as needed, they can participate. If all they want to do is draw attention, cause problems, take people’s time and not get well, they cannot come.

Seek to discern what the root of their problem is: by word of knowledge, vision, prophetic word, discussion, or in-depth counseling interview.

Call on others in the small group to team pray; provide saturation prayer weekly.

Consider “assigning” willing small group members to be their “counselor,” limiting counsel to that one person to whom the counselee is accountable.

Give them time to experience growth as they receive loving nurture and modeling of healthy relationships.

GROUP NOT GROWING

Focus on quality, not quantity. Eight or more consistent people is okay: Enjoy it! “God gives the increase”– forget competition. If you feel it, confess it and relax.

Ask people who came but stopped coming why they stopped (without intimidating them!) Be teachable, but listen to God in their answers. Ask God for a humble heart. (Humble means to lay down defense mechanisms.)

Are contentious or chronic problem people dominating the meetings? Are you seeing the needs of the people being met?

Are you basically following the same format? Do you need to make (better) arrangements for childcare?

Are you enjoying the meetings? Would you come if you weren’t the leader? Why? What would help you want to come?

Are you and others continually inviting people to the kinship, or passively waiting for others to just show up?

Are you playing regularly, doing things the people enjoy?

Ask group members (not in desperation, but conversation) how they feel about the group and what they think would help it to grow.

Consider the possibility the Lord is leading you to end the group. Ending a group is not a failure nor does it make you a failure.

GROUP GROWING TOO FAST

Hallelujah! Pray and search for others who can help serve and ultimately facilitate when you multiply (see sections on leadership development and multiplication of small groups.)

Don’t succumb to the temptations to:

- Gloat, become proud, or esteem yourself more highly than you should.
- Try to do it all by yourself.
- Develop a power base.

- Quit seeking God because it's going well.
- Prepare to multiply at the right time (you may be a gatherer or you may have several gatherers in your group). **Realize quick growth isn't always true growth**; give it time to level out.

NO WORSHIP LEADER

Pray for one.

Let the pastor in charge of worship leaders know your need.

Look for potential worship leaders in your group. Sing without an instrument if someone can carry it with their voice alone. Urge them to learn to play guitar or keyboards and/or attend worship training.

“Borrow” a willing worship leader from another group.

Use CD's or DVD's for worship. They work much better than you'd think, especially if the hosts have a good sound system.

FEELINGS OF RESENTMENT TOWARD PASTOR(S)

There can be many reasons for feelings of resentment towards pastors, some legitimate and some not. There can be too little communication from the pastor, not enough help, or not enough encouragement, causing the leader to feel smothered by the needs of others and used by the pastor. Sometimes the leaders have needs for approval and praise the pastor could never meet (and should never meet). Frequently, the leader has expectations the pastor cannot fulfill (the desire to be best friends, to “hang out” together, etc.).

Whatever the reasons behind the resentments, there is only one way to deal with them. First, forgive from the heart **before** going to talk to the pastor. Use the steps of forgiveness: Make sure you also confess to the Lord the record of wrongs and/or judgment you were holding in your heart. Then go to the pastor quickly, telling no one else (backbiting or gossiping) and share your feelings in love (“speaking the truth in love”). Then listen carefully to the pastor's “side” with a desire to understand them and their needs. Acknowledge any wrong need for approval, praise or other expectations on your part. Express the forgiveness you already released from your heart in prayer.

Renegotiate your relationship with the pastor and with your ministry. Define more clearly expectations on both sides, so legitimate needs can be met and others released to God. Don't allow the enemy to have opportunity by letting the sun go down on your anger! Real, honest, powerful unity among leaders has amazing spiritual benefits. See attempts to build walls as the work of an enemy, and get it into the light right away.

Dealing with Problem Personalities

Community occurs at a sufficient depth where everyone is heard and accepted in openness and honesty in the process of: 1) discovering the real self in the ministry of Jesus; 2) authenticity, stopping games, putting down masks; and 3) the process of becoming whole. This requires someone being “present” or “with” them.

UNHEALTHY DISCLOSURE

Each time there are new people present at your group, it is helpful for you, as a leader, to go over the purpose of your Small Group. This helps establish ground rules for the

new ones and cuts down on unrealistic expectations.

- When a person begins sharing in a non-productive way, here are some things to consider doing: Allow them to participate while trying to determine if they are testing the group to find its acceptance level. If the person persists for a long time, they are probably not testing, but trying to dominate.
- Let your Small Group have an opportunity to participate in handling the problem. If your group has come to a healthy position, they will often be able to handle the problem in a very loving way. Remember: we do not want to damage the person; we want to help.
- Often it will be necessary to take a person aside and speak to them privately regarding the problem. If you have a relationship with them, the success rate of helping is greatly enhanced. The opposite is also true. Paul gives us some insight on this: "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity" (I Tim. 5:1-2).

Special Individuals with Special Problems

Small Groups bring out personal problems because some of the most fundamental difficulties we have are in the area of personal interaction.

Quite often, if a group is having difficulty, the individual personalities in the group are contributing to it. Let's meet some of them:

Marty Luther:

("Here I stand and I'm not going to budge!") This person combines dogmatism with impenetrability by pronouncing the last word on the subject. Generally, this person feels that his word is "direct from the Lord" and expects that no one would disagree. The other group members react with awesome respect, or anger, but you as leader should help them see that matters are not always black and white. In any given situation, if Mr. Luther's conclusion is acceptable, let it go. But if he has ignored what the group has come up with in the discussion, try to summarize the entire exchange to set the balance. Remember that Mr. Luther makes a valuable contribution to the group, so don't exclude him.

Chattering Charlie:

(The compulsive talker.) Whether interesting or boring, this person never stops talking. He's always the one to answer the questions. During the sharing time he engages in a monologue that anesthetizes the group. You may feel like the "ogre," but you have to be sensitive to the needs of the other group members. Chattering Charlie's talking may be indicative of other problems in his life, so be sensitive to this and be gentle in your direction: "Charlie, I know that Alice has something to share. Let's pray for your needs now, then turn our attention to hers."

Silent Sarah:

The opposite of Chattering Charlie, she never says a peep from beginning to end of the session. Just because she is not talking does not mean she is not thinking. There are a few ways you can encourage Sarah to talk. Often a personal invitation works well: "Sarah, what would you say to that?" Sometimes phrasing a question (knowing that it is part of her experience) might encourage her to answer. Also, there might be ways that she could contribute to group leadership. For instance, would she be a good person to keep the group's Prayer Journal? In any case, be sure that you affirm her verbally (as

she leaves perhaps) and appreciate her uniqueness in the group.

Negative Norm:

(Constructs the obstacle course.) Nothing pleases Norm. He only reluctantly goes along with what the group is doing. He complains about his life and usually shares from the negative perspective. He has tremendous potential to offend others. This person should be confronted directly if he hurts someone in the group. A rebuke is hard to give (and hard to take!), but we must speak the truth in love. If the problem persists, a personal conversation might be helpful: "Norm, you seem to be so unhappy lately. Is something bothering you?" In the meantime, Norm needs your love and acceptance and realization that he will not change overnight.

Peace-At-Any-Price Paul:

(The conformist.) Paul is the one who has trouble dealing with conflict in a group. He personally avoids controversial subjects and if anyone else in the group disagrees with another, Paul feels the unity of the Spirit has been lost. In group decision-making, Paul will go along with whatever the other group members decide, usually without offering his own opinion. It is important to discern the motivation behind his compliance. Is it because he really does not have a preference or because he is afraid of conflict? As you get to know him better, you will learn how to "read" him. Keep the lines of communication open and give him permission to disagree verbally. If he cuts short conflicts involving others, you might wish to intervene with something like: "Paul, it sounds like these two are close to an agreement. Let's let them work it out so that we can all sleep tonight!" Paul's special gift to the group can be one of peacemaker if he can learn how to manage creative, constructive conflict.

Atom-Bomb Alex:

A silent anger that eventually explodes without warning characterizes Alex's group participation. This person will sit through a meeting irritated and quiet, never sharing what is on his mind. At the point of impact, the group could well ask, "Why didn't you tell us before?!" When the explosion occurs, give him full opportunity to vent his feelings honestly (without letting him hurt the others). Above all, DON'T PANIC! Really listen to him and then solicit the feelings and opinions of the others to come to an equitable solution. Discussing the subject can result in a deep, cleansing experience in koinonia.

Domination Dorothy:

(Has to be the boss.) Dorothy insists on doing everything herself. In the group situation, whether motivated by false sense of superiority or by an energetic enthusiasm to have things her way, she tends to squelch the creativity and openness of other group members. A group is turned off by her insensitivity and will likely react with resentment and impatience. While affirming her competence and skill, gently tell her (privately) that her behavior is being interpreted as rudeness or bad manners. Appeal to her sense of confidence and suggest that she make an effort to defer to other group members. In a sense, her behavior is a test of your leadership. Do not allow her to intimidate you, but stand your group firmly for the sake of balanced leadership and the welfare of the other group members.

In conclusion:

Each of these personalities (and others you can identify from your own experience) has positive potential if brought under the lordship of Christ. Your job, as leader of the group, is to remain the advocate of each individual, helping each to "grow up into

Christ" (Eph. 4:15). Recognize that many folks who have problems in groups are communicating their deepest hurts and fears in a way that preserves their self-image. Be gentle when you confront, and be willing to follow through with them. Wise confrontation obligates the giver to stand by with a helping hand.

You may wonder if a person has a serious emotional or psychological problem. If you suspect that the problem is too big to handle, do not hesitate to call your Coach or the Small Group Pastor for advice. Generally, in such a case you need to tell the person that the group would be glad to support them IF they would seek professional help. However, if the person does not submit to professional counseling, it is impossible for the group to meet their great needs, and you will need to request the person to drop out of the group. This is hard to do, but it is for the good of the troubled person as well as for the other group members.

Ask a pastor to refer you to a marriage and family counselor, Christian psychologist, or psychiatrist.

Taken from John Mallison, Building Small Groups in the Christian Community, Renewal publications, 1978. pp. 106-110.

William Bangham, The Journey Into Small Groups, Southern Baptist Convention, 1974. pp. 57-58.