

## 5 Steps to Leading a Quality Discussion Group

One of the most effective teaching tools we have in Junior High Ministry is the small discussion group. Typically, these are used in large meetings where it would be difficult to hear from everyone. This could range from a large cell group of 15 students to a Blowout meeting with over a hundred in attendance. Typically, the teacher will come up with the questions, and whoever is leading the meeting will have some kind of system for breaking up discussion groups (like age, gender, friendship lines, or even strategically to break up cliques). Also, discussion in small groups is usually preceded by a shortened teaching so that the students have taken in enough information to interact with it meaningfully in discussion groups.

After the whole-group portion of the teaching, the groups with their discussion leaders should split up and spread out as much as possible in the meeting location. At that point, there are five key steps that you as the leader should keep in mind to make the most out of your discussion group.

### 1. Take Charge

- As the discussion leader, you are responsible to lead the group and set the tone. If *you* want it to go off course a little bit for a purpose, you are free to do so. If *you* want to bring it back on track, then you should make that happen. It is your prerogative, not the students', because you are the one God has in that position leading the discussion!
- Decide *and communicate* ground rules—whether or not they have to raise hands, answering in a certain order, asking unrelated questions, etc.
- If a student wants to take the discussion in an unrelated direction *and you don't want the discussion to go that way*, you should let them know that you are going to focus on this other question/point instead. However, *you can reject the topic without rejecting the student*. Tell them that you appreciate their idea and would like to talk about it afterward, but you want to cover this other thing right now.
- Do the same thing if a student is dominating the discussion, e.g. "It's great to hear your perspective and you always have great stuff to contribute, but we want to hear from people who haven't shared yet."
- If possible, make sure the students already know you and respect you from previous positive interactions.
- Bring a lot of energy!
- Be interested in who they are and what they have to say—express it with your tone, body language, and words.
- Feel free to tailor the questions to your group, skipping or adding points in conjunction with the students' needs.

### 2. Draw Out

- Don't expect the question to do all the work when you read it! You need to draw out answers from the students.
- In general, throw out the question to the whole group first.
- Don't be afraid to call out individual students to ask for their thoughts. Just make sure you do it in a way that is *warm* and *interested*, rather than in a way that is *demanding*.
- If someone still doesn't want to share after you asked them individually, don't badger them. This is counterproductive as it shuts down communication.

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- Give a sample answer to help jog students' thinking, but only if they're stuck.
- Use your most powerful weapon: ENCOURAGEMENT! But remember, encouragement is primarily effective for *getting people to continue or increase what they are already doing*. It is not nearly as useful in getting them to start doing something they aren't. In other words, wait until someone who seems shy speaks up and shares a point, and then encourage the student emphatically! Encourage publicly in the moment, and catch him or her afterward and encourage again privately.
- If a non-believer is opening up *and seems to enjoy discussing his or her views with the group*, feel free to put the questions on hold and discuss the gospel with the student. The modeling you can provide for evangelism might be more valuable to the group as a whole than anything you would cover in discussion. If the student doesn't seem into continuing the discussion publicly, follow up afterward. (See step 5 below.)

### 3. Check for Understanding

- Never assume they get it! Don't assume the whole group understands the concept just because a small minority had good answers.
- Ask students if they understand. If they nod "yes," it could be just to get you to move on. I like to ask questions like that to get some kind of physical response (nod yes, shake your head, thumbs up/down for agree/disagree, etc.) and then ask students why they think that. This will show if they actually understand. *Remember to be warm and friendly when you are doing this!* It shouldn't feel like they are giving a school presentation.
- Ask the same question from a different angle and see if their answers change. If so, they didn't understand the point—they just had a lucky guess.
- Play devil's advocate to try to get them to defend their answer.

### 4. Clarify

- The previous step—checking for understanding—is an important step because students often completely mishear the teaching, even if it was crystal clear. When you check for understanding and notice an important point they misunderstood, you as the discussion leader *need to re-teach it*.
- Explain it *clearly, simply, and briefly*. Avoid the common mistake of over-using analogies to try to clarify a confusing point—it often adds to the chaos.
- After explaining again, go back and check for understanding again. Did they understand it this time? If not, then re-explain in a different way. If the point is important, there is no use moving on while they are still lost on it, unless you decide you want to cut your losses and cover another question.
- If just one or two students seem stuck on a point, ask to follow up with them later.

### 5. Follow Up

- One of the best results of doing discussion groups is that it brings individual students' views to light in some important areas. Particularly if you are serving in a CT meeting (Amp, JAM, Blowout), this is one of the best opportunities you will have for getting into the gospel with individual students: they may make

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a point during discussion that shows they don't understand the gospel, and you can bring it up individually and move them toward receiving Christ.

- In addition, students may reveal things in their lives that need to be addressed. It may be a serious issue that you need more information about for the sake of the students' safety, or it may be a ministry opportunity in front of the student, or it may be something painful which simply requires a listening ear. Make note of what they share and ask them about it afterward.
- If a student had a point that you wanted to discuss individually, catch them immediately after the group ends, rather than hoping for a later opportunity that may or may not come. Your best bet may be to walk with them to a more comfortable spot, or ask if they want to head over and grab a snack/drink.
- When following up, start with an approving message, e.g. "I was really interested in what you said about—," or "I *really* appreciate you opening up earlier, for real."
- If the student tries to end the conversation, then end the conversation. Do an activity with them, change the subject, or just let them run off. *It's not a good thing* to let the conversation drop, because they won't hear what you want to tell them. However, *it's an even worse thing* to force it, because they *still* won't hear you, and they won't like you either!
- It's not easy to tell if they are trying to end the conversation, because often middle schoolers' squirrely-ness is mistaken for disinterest. If it were an adult and he/she was looking around, saying unrelated things, etc., you would know that the person is not interested, but that's not necessarily so with middle schoolers. As long as you're being *warm*, you should err on the side of engaging the topic.
- Consider offering to pray for them on the spot depending on how your conversation goes. At least let them know that you will be praying for them. Then, be sure to actually pray for them!
- Help the student you pulled aside transition from serious time to fun time by entering with them into a group activity or social circle after you are done talking.