

Leading an Effective Discussion

DO's

Provide the right environment.

People must have time to think after you've asked a question.

People must feel safe to state their opinion.

Have people sit where they can easily see each other speaking (in a circle) and at approximately eye level with each other.

Use eye contact to include everyone in the group.

Use discussable questions. For example:

“What are the first four books of the New Testament?” is not discussable—there is only one correct answer. However, this question is discussable: “Why do you think the four different accounts of Jesus are included in the Bible?” Using good questions will be your most important task in facilitating a Bible discussion. (See [“Build Your Own Bible Discussion.”](#))

Keep the discussion going. Ask, “What do the rest of you think?” or “What are some of your responses to that?”

Minimize leader talk. The more you talk, the less they will. Remember that you're a conversation facilitator. The goal is interaction between group members, not a lecture by you.

Use redirection. Have several people answer the same question. For example:

Leader: *What does Ephesians 5 mean to you?*

Gertrude: *I didn't get anything out of it.*

Leader: *Hmmm. Harriet? (Didn't repeat question.)*

Harriet: *Oh, I totally disagree. It has the most lasting truths of our faith.*

Leader: *(Nods to Beatrice. Doesn't say anything.)*

Beatrice: *Well, it made me realize I wasn't very loving to my brother.*

Leader: *That's interesting. Did anyone else get a practical application?...Sylvia?*

The leader picked up on the last comment to form a new question. The leader needs to stay in control of the discussion, but doesn't have to talk incessantly.

Redirection from a tangent: Graciously say to the rabbit-trail taker, “Those are interesting thoughts.” (You might add: “That might be a good topic to talk more about afterwards.”) Then, to the rest of the group, summarize where the discussion left off and restate the question or ask a new one.

Use prompting. If you ask a question no one can answer, give people some additional direction or adjust the question so it's a better one. Avoid answering your own question. For example:

Leader: *How could Isaiah's vision in the temple benefit the modern church?*

Group: (Blank looks)

Leader: *Isaiah had an overwhelming vision of God as holy and exalted. If we were overwhelmed by God's holiness, how would that change our lives?*

Ask for elaboration or clarification. Have people elaborate on their ideas. For example:

Leader: *What can we learn from Abraham's obedience?*

Esmerelda: *Discipline.*

Leader: *Oh yes, that's good. What can we learn about discipline from Abraham?*

Other invitations to elaborate can be:

"Tell us more."

"What do you mean by the term _____?"

"Can you explain (or illustrate) that?"

Give positive reinforcement. "Good idea," "Thank you," and frequent smiles or head nods go a long way to encourage people to feel safe in discussions.

But what if someone is totally off base? Try to reinforce as much of the answer as possible. For example:

Leader: *What does Jesus' death on the cross mean to us?*

Billy Sue: *It means we can get drunk every night and cheat on tests because God will forgive us.*

Leader: *Forgiveness! That really is the key issue when we think of the cross. You sure are right in that.*

But what do you think our response to God's forgiveness should be? ...Earlene?

Call on non-volunteers. After asking a question, pause and look several people in the eye. This will make them think you are going to call on them. About 50% of the time, call on someone to answer. But always give people time to think. For example:

Don't say "Bob, what is your favorite book of the Bible?"

Say, "What is your favorite book of the Bible? (Pause. Look several people in the eye.) ...Bob?"

DON'Ts

Don't echo. Don't repeat people's answers. If they can't be heard, ask them to repeat it.

Don't answer your own questions. See prompting above.

Don't look for one answer. "That's good, but it's not quite what I'm looking for," will kill a discussion. If you want to make one point, just state it, teach it, or use another appropriate method.

Don't tell people they are wrong. Try to avoid saying, "You're wrong," or, "I think you made a mistake, Bettylou." See the example under positive reinforcement for ideas on how to handle this. Don't leave an obvious error unchallenged. Make sure the discussion brings out the right ideas. But you don't have to tell someone in front of a group that they were wrong—they will figure it out. If you need to express your disagreement, try these responses:

"What you're saying raises some red flags in my mind."

"I appreciate that perspective. May I tell you how I view it?"

"I'm just wondering, have you considered ____?"

Don't let one or two people dominate. Use redirection and call on non-volunteers to try to handle this situation. "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken up yet." If necessary, talk to the dominating person privately. Look for ministry opportunities—why does this person feel the need to talk so much? How can you help him grow in this area?

Don't interrupt. Let people finish what they are saying.

Don't probe. Encourage people to share what they want to, but don't make them share what they don't want to. If someone in the group starts to probe, say, "Let's let Jill tell it the way she sees it." or "Why don't we let Jill finish what she has to say?"

Don't give advice. Advice is cheap and sometimes disastrous. If someone else in the group has had an experience that is applicable to the person's situation, allow him to share it. But do not go on to draw the conclusion for the person. If the person specifically asks for advice, tell what you might do in a similar situation.

WHAT IF..

I'm trying to do everything right and our group still won't discuss?

Let people write down ideas first and then call on several volunteers to share what they've written.

Have people discuss the questions with the person sitting next to them and then bring ideas to the whole group.