

Troubleshooting Tips

Creating safe place~ where life change can be maximized is not easy. Small groups undergo some type of relational difficulty. If group members expect to grow, people will have to be vulnerable. Anyone who has ever led or been a part of a nurturing small group will tell you that where people are emotionally transparent, problems will come to the surface. When they do, it's the leader's job to help steer the group in the right direction.

Two principles guide a leader's attempts at successful troubleshooting. First, any solution must promote the health and wholeness of the individual. Second, any resolution must also promote the health and wholeness of the total group.

#1 - The Overly Talkative Member

If not moderated properly, what often begins as a trickle of friendly patter can turn into a virtual flood of words. The Talker is rarely shy, and usually very uncomfortable with long periods of silence. Typically, what's behind this need to fill in the pauses is the fear of intimacy or personal disclosure. The Talker is very quick to move on an item and can very easily unsettle a group's pacing if there is not some type of sensitive intervention. Here are some tools that you may find helpful.

Establish ground rules for your group

- . Set the rule that no one can speak a second time unless everyone who wants to talk has had a chance to speak. Make (or reiterate) the rule that no one can overrun someone else while they are speaking (translation: "NO INTERRUPTING!").
- . Go systematically around the group, allowing each person a chance to talk. Remember at the onset to be sensitive with members who are either unaccustomed to or feel uncomfortable with speaking in a group setting.
- . Use the "pass system" whereby group members pass the invitation to talk to each other
- . Assure the talkative member privately that you value his or her sharing but that you wish to hear other people's comments as well. In front of the group, state that you would like to hear more about the person's items of interest after the meeting.
- . Agree at the beginning of the meeting to save some issues for the end, after everything else has been discussed (this only works after you have seen the Talker verbally camp on certain subjects repeatedly).
- . Here's a creative solution: throw a football or some other object around the room. Only the person with the object in his or her hand has the right to talk in the group.
- . During the discussion, simply interject and sensitively direct a question to another person.

Meet individually

- . Spend some one-an-one time with the Talker. Attempt to ascertain the driving issues that are making it necessary for the person to dominate the meeting.
- . Firmly and sensitively confront the person in private. Begin with the positive contributions the person has made in the group and the need for others to be given the opportunity to make a similar impact. Use the confrontation time as an important affirmation moment as well.
- . Ask for the Talker's help in drawing others out. Suggest he or she ask, "So what do the rest of you think?"

#2- The Answer Person

Answer people all too quickly dismantle safe places. Other members should not have to experience the pain of non-attention, judgment, or an argumentative spirit.

Take action during the meeting

- . Backtrack to the original idea, question, or thought shared. .refocus on the original material collect info from everyone; then summarize.
- . Lovingly redirect the discussion to the other group members: "How do the rest of you feel?"
- . Affirm what is right about the "always right" person's answers, but look for other points of view
- . Be a model of true empathy yourself so the Answer person can see a better way to help others.
- . Remind the group of the importance of silence.
- . Avoid arguing about who is right or wrong.
- . Before the meeting, share how "pat" answers or oversimplified responses make others feel. Ask the group to monitor themselves. Do not feel afraid to call members on this after you have set the ground rules.
- . Direct the group to prayer.

Speak to the Answer person

- . If it's a continuing problem, talk with the person outside the group. Describe to them what their sharing in this manner does to the group. Tell the truth in love.
- . Affirm the person for what they do know, also let them know how their knowledge may not be what is needed or appropriate
- . Let the person know they need to let the communication of others stand on its own without judgment or immediate correction.
- . Ask the insensitive member to share more feelings rather than thoughts ("I think .").
- . Ask the Answer person to help summarize or rephrase points of the discussion.
- . Attempt to find out from the person privately what drives him or her to always appear "in the know."

#3 The Member with an Agenda

All of us struggle from time to time with the issue of wanting to maintain inordinate control over aspects of our lives. Groups can become the arena where our sinful power struggles play out. Some individuals will be especially prone to repeatedly trying to prove themselves and will try to redirect some facet of group life their way for no apparent reason other than their own preferences.

A person presenting this problem leaves telltale language clues. Look for phrases such as "yes, but" or "Well, I think." Often this person is critical of the group process, even with items considered tabled by the group. Here are some hints to aid you in dealing with this individual.

Reaffirm group covenants while you're all together

- . Reaffirm, recast, reestablish, challenge, redefine-use whatever word you want-but remind everyone of the agreed upon guidelines for group involvement.
- . Discuss these standards with everyone in the group to affirm the purpose and values of the gathering.

Speak to the person with the agenda

- . Confront the person privately and attempt to discern the underlying problem
- . Suggest that the person work with the other members to find a proactive solution that solves the problem yet doesn't violate the boundary established by the group.

#4-Superficial Discussions

Beginning relationships often have a period where facts are shared more easily than feelings. Not much is bartered in terms of emotional risk and therefore not much is gained at this stage. Early on, this surface-level communication is normal and shouldn't be cause for alarm.

Often though, a group struggles to break through the strong ice of superficiality and go deeper even after many meetings. This hesitation can be the result of a leader's direction, or because someone else is impeding progress in group members' bonding. Whatever is keeping the group in a "functionally frozen" mode, you can easily prepare yourself to handle this problem.

Surface communication can also be a sign that you are attempting to go too deep too fast. Mentally take a step back and ascertain whether this is so. If you sense you have gone too quickly, admit your error and be willing to proceed at a more realistic pace. By humbling yourself in this way, you model vulnerability rather than harming the relational chemistry of those gathered. Your openness actually works to center the focus and unite the participants for future growth together.

Improve your questions

- . By far, the number one way to open up a group is to lead by example. "Speed of the leader, speed of the team," . Usual rule of thumb is to speak as deeply and openly as you would like the others to share.
- . Have specific applications and questions. Don't be afraid to challenge the group.
- . Ask "feeling" questions rather than just "opinion" or "fact" questions.
- . Ask open ended questions & not ones that can simply be answered yes or no
- . Where appropriate, be more directive. Sometimes ask closed-ended questions that will elicit specific answers rather than open-ended questions.
- . Restate and rephrase the question. Often silence means group members are simply unsure of what was asked of them. (Silence may also indicate they're thinking, not that they're reluctant.)

Create a safer climate

- . During initial minutes of the meeting, remind members of confidentiality guidelines.
- . If your group is too large, break into smaller subgroups.
- . Contact the group members outside of the meeting to see if anything could have made the questions easier to answer.