

Breakout 1:

More Than Questions: The Art of Small Groups

Add personal story about a small group experience.

Maybe this story sounds like your small group. Every small group has its own dynamics and personalities, but there are some things we can do as leaders to set the group up for success. So let's get practical.

To start, a good small group happens before it begins. There are a few things every small group leader must know and do before they start their small group.

1. Know the goal of the small group.

Every Life Night, Edge Night, Purpose session, retreat, or small group resource has a goal. This goal is clearly stated at the beginning of the resource. Know what that goal is and how the small group time plays into it.

2. Read the questions ahead of time.

Be sure to review all the small group questions ahead of the small group. Don't wait until you've already begun to see what you are going to ask. If necessary, highlight any questions that may be challenging for your group and re-word questions (but don't change them) to fit your style of speech. If you need to add "icebreaker" questions, do that as well.

3. Set a direction.

Identify what questions are the most important and be sure you get to those questions. A small group question list may have more questions than you can get through - don't spend all your time asking icebreaker questions if your group has been together for several months. Highlight the important things to ask so you don't get sidetracked.

4. Pray for your group. Don't ever underestimate the power of grace. Spend a few minutes prior to the start of your small group praying for each of the small group members (if possible, by name).

Now that we've talked about how to set the group up for success, let's go through some foundational practices that will help you lead a great small group.

1. Ground the group in Christ.

This is actually simple to do. Start and end the group in prayer (it doesn't have to be long) and be sure your conversations always come back around to Jesus. This doesn't mean that every comment needs to be tied back to Him (e.g. "Oh, you saw the new Star Wars movie? You know, Jesus was like the original Jedi..."), but that the overall focus of the group should be toward growing faith.

2. Follow the rules.

It is helpful, especially for younger teens, to have rules that are followed in small group. If your small group will be together long term, establish these rules early on as a group activity. If you are only in that small group for the night, briefly lay out your expectations for conduct. These rules should include notes about respecting others, being attentive, and not using information shared in the group to harm others or spread gossip. Share what consequences there might be for violating the rules.

3. Get people talking.

If the group is too silent, you may need to ask what we call a “Whip Around” question. This is a quick, easy to answer question that everyone responds to. It could be, “What is the most recent movie you’ve seen?” or “Favorite song right now?” Avoid questions that require deeper thought (e.g. “What movie impacted you the most?”) or long answers (e.g. “Explain how you met your best friend”). These questions get people talking and will help boost participation in the group.

4. Listen more than you talk.

It can be tempting to use the small group as a time to give another teaching, offer your testimony, or answer the questions yourself while offering advice.

5. Embrace silence.

Teenagers need time to process questions and often do not have a vocabulary that can accurately express what they want to say. Allow for longer periods of silence so that teens can collect their thoughts. It will be tempting to jump in with a clarification on the question or to start talking to break the silence - resist that temptation.

6. Affirm, redirect, and engage.

When a teen shares something, affirm him or her. A simple, “Thank you for sharing,” or “That was a really good insight, ” will encourage them (and others) to share more. If a teen starts to go off topic or is speaking too much, redirect them by saying, “You are making some interesting points, let’s see what other people think, ” or “That’s a cool idea, but right now I want to answer this question - what do you think about this one?” Finally, engage teens that are silent. Don’t get pushy, but invite them to share, e.g. “Tricia, what do you think?” Sometimes this can help teens that are shy or feel “talked over” to have space to share.

7. Allow vulnerability.

Small groups must be a safe place for vulnerability and sharing. People quickly discern the boundaries of how vulnerable they can be based on the reaction of group members and, in particular, leaders when they begin to be vulnerable. Creating a vulnerable space requires time and the willingness to walk with young people.

Some other practical tips for small groups are to ask questions weekly about the lives of the teens and follow up. If possible, support them (along with other Core Members) at their events. You can connect with the parents of teens in your group. Supporting parents may be one of the

best things you can do for the lives of their son or daughter.

Be consistent. Showing up consistently often speaks louder than any words you may say.

Small groups may seem simple, but they are often where the deepest transformation happens.

In those circles, teens learn they are seen, known, and loved, not just by their leaders, but by

God. Never underestimate what the Holy Spirit can do through a consistent presence, a good

question, a listening ear, or a moment of vulnerability.

Close in prayer.