

SKILL 4: HOW TO FACILITATE GROUP DISCUSSIONS

1. Good group discussions begin with good discussion questions

(See How to Create or Select Good Discussion Questions)

2. Begin with a short prayer asking God to bless your time.

Sample: "Heavenly Father, thank you for the opportunity to meet again and share our lives with one another and care for one another and grow together as we look at (whatever you are studying) from your perspective. Would you give us your mind on (study topic) and guide and lead us. In your name we pray. Amen."

3. Begin with an open, launching question (these should be speculative, thought provoking, and answers the question, what do I know or think, what do I feel or what should I do?)

Examples:

"Anything in this week's study or reading that really struck you?"

"What's something new you learned in this week's study?"

"This week's study was on faith. What do you think is the best synonym for faith?" Why do you think that is the best synonym for faith?"

"There was a story told in our study about a man/woman who...what do you think you would have done had you been in his/her situation?"

"Our study this week is in on the topic of marriage. Why do you think the divorce rate in America is so high, around 50-60%?"

4. Learn to be comfortable with silence after a question. Allow people time to ponder the question; allow people who don't want to speak up, to remain silent.

5. Be ready to answer your own question (but only after some time and no one has spoken up and to loosen things up so others will chime in; break the ice). Be authentic about your own struggles and victories as a Christian. Authenticity breeds authenticity.

Examples:

Q: "Anything in this week's study or reading that really struck you?"

Silence

A: "Well, there was a passage in the study that talked about how we...that really struck me because I do that all the time..."

Q: "This week's study was on faith. What do you think is the best synonym for faith?" Why do you think that is the best synonym for faith?"

Silence

A: "Well, when I think about faith, I think more in terms of why I'm lacking it than having it. And I think I struggle with faith because for me it is all about control....loosing it...not having it...putting your life in someone else's hands...."

Q: "There was a story told in our study about a man/woman who...What do you think you would have done had you been in his/her situation?"

Silence

A: "Boy, if I were the man in the story, I probably would have done just the opposite, because I'm thinking there's no way...."

Q: "Our study this week is in on the topic of marriage. Why do you think the divorce rate in America is so high, around 50-60%?"

Silence:

A: "My personal opinion is that we're engrained at an early age that we have the right to our own happiness and with so many choices..."

6. Be ready to call on ones you know will not be intimidated

Examples:

Q: "Anything in this week's study or reading that really struck you?"

Silence

A: "Well, there was a passage in the study that talked about how we...that really struck me because I do that all the time..."

"David, what about you, anything that struck you?"

Q: "This week's study was on faith. What do you think is the best synonym for faith?" Why do you think that is the best synonym for faith?"

Silence

A: "Well, when I think about faith, I think more in terms of why I'm lacking it than having it. And I think I struggle with faith because for me it is all about control....loosing it...not having it...putting your life in someone else's hands...."

"Tim, what do you think? What's the best synonym for faith in your book?"

Q: "There was a story told in our study about a man/woman who...What do you think you would have done had you been in his/her situation?"

Silence

A: "Boy, if I were the man in the story, I probably would have done just the opposite, because I'm thinking there's no way...."

"Susan, what about you, what do you think you would have done?"

Q: "Our study this week is in on the topic of marriage. Why do you think the divorce rate in America is so high, around 50-60%?"

Silence:

A: "My personal opinion is that we're engrained at an early age that we have the right to our own happiness and with so many choices..."

"Jane, why do you think the divorce rate is so high in America?"

7. Ask the questions you have created or selected that will best facilitate discussions

Steer the group from counseling one another with "you should..." or "you need to..."; vs. sharing their own experiences "I should... I need to..."

8. Acknowledge and affirm everyone and their answers

Examples:

"Jane, thanks for sharing that. I think you're right on!"

"Boy, I never thought of it that way. That's a good observation, Susan."

"Thanks for sharing that Tim. That was really honest and probably not easy to share, thanks."

"Great answer Dave! I wish I had thought of that."

9. Clarify people's responses or questions to help people feel heard and understood, and to get better clarity on their statements or questions.

Examples:

"If I heard you right Jane. You're saying that the divorce rate in America is so high because.....Is that right?"

"Let me see if I understand what you are saying....."

"You seem to be asking, how can we develop faith or trust in someone we can't see, is that right?"

10. Take it to the group (don't be the answer man. If you are monopolizing the discussions, you are not doing your job!)

Examples:

"If I heard you right Jane. You're saying that the divorce rate in America is so high because.....Is that right?"

"What do the rest of you guys think?" "What do others of you think about what was just shared?"

"You seem to be asking, how can we develop faith or trust in someone we can't see, is that right?"

"Well, what do you guys think? How can we develop faith or trust in someone we can't see or feel or touch?"

"James, thanks for sharing your experience with grief. How about the rest of us, how have some of you dealt with grief?"

"Donna, thanks for sharing about your struggles at work. Anyone else have similar struggles at work? How might we have responded to similar confrontations at work?"

11. Try to increase group participation by all members. Try breaking down into smaller groups of two or three, each addressing one or more question and then get back together and share.

12. Go deeper or explore further, good & interesting responses.

Examples:

"Ally, that was a really good insight. Mind telling us how you came to that realization?"

"Wow, that does sound painful. How did you deal with it? And how are you dealing with it today?"

"It's is awesome when we begin to see God work in our lives as you shared, Sheryl. How had this made a difference in your relationships with family and friends?"

13. Summarize. Summarize what the group has been saying. Reflect it back to them. Sum up the main point of the study.

Examples:

"So far it seems we have been saying that....."

"If there is one recurring theme of this week's study, it is that..."

"I think we've seen that God is consistent when it comes to...."

14. Don't allow the study to drive the group. Care for the individual. Remember the study is a tool, a means, not an end. Don't feel like "we have to go thru the study". If an opportunity comes up to pray for someone or talk about something else significant, do so. If they need to be referred to a Stephens Minister, do so. If they need financial help, refer them to our Good Sense ministry, etc. "Don't quench the Spirit" (See Referrals in your Leaders Notebook)

15. Don't feel obligated to finish all the questions. To finish early is always better than to finish late. Just because you worked on creating or selecting the questions, doesn't mean you have to force everyone else to go through them. Stay on time!

16. Don't get side tracked. Sometimes the discussions will go in another direction. If you feel it is a worthwhile conversation where people are truly trying to resolve an issue or learn something meaningful, let it go. If however you judge it to be something that is sensational or human curiosity, or can be addressed at a later time simply say, "You know what, you bring up a very interesting point to ponder. Let's schedule that offline or at a later group time to discuss that, ok."

17. Don't allow someone to monopolize the discussions. If one is consistently answering everything or taking too long for his or her answers, try these things:

- a) Calling on someone else
- b) Put a soft time limit on the answers: "Let's take a few minutes each to answer this question.
- c) Enlist him or her to help you draw others out and increase group participation

If there is a consistent problem with a monopolizer, the best thing to do is to talk with that individual offline in a loving manner. Affirm his or her value to the group and stress the importance of ministering to one another and allowing others to voice their thoughts so they can minister to the rest of the group.

18. Don't fear some controversy or differences of opinion. Don't allow inappropriate displays of anger due to differences of opinion such as yelling or insulting or dismissing. But short of that if people differ in their view, that's ok. Acknowledge it and move on, allowing people freedom for differing views: "Well, we certainly have two or several differing views about that. That's interesting. That's OK. The key of course, is to discover God's view or His intention on the matter. As long as we're all willing to honestly look at His word, pray about it and derive our convictions from our personal study and thinking of the word and not someone else's opinion, I think that is healthy and what God would want. We can agree to disagree and yet still conduct ourselves toward one another with love as God intended. Ok, let's move on to the next question..."