

Twelve Suggestions for Good Discussion Leadership

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- I. **Understand the Purpose and Value of Guided Group Discussions**
 - Group discussions achieve give and take and foster a different and in some ways better form of learning than one-way communication (lectures, sermons, etc.)
 - At the core of group discussions is the art of question asking and answering, dialogue over weighty subjects.
 - The value of group discussions is the higher level of mental engagement on the part of the listeners, since they could speak at some point. Thus they can't settle into a glazed state of passive, pseudo-listening. Group discussions enable participants to ask and answer questions that come from the weighty subjects being discussed.

- II. **Begin With Clear One-Way “Big Picture” Communication**
 - The leader should be able to begin the time with one-way communication that sets the stage for the group discussion.
 - The leader should be able to summarize the content well, and draw out some crucial issues that will be the focus of the discussion time.
 - In this way, the leader establishes their role as leader for the rest of the time, and sets the table for the group discussion.

- III. **Embrace and Retain Your Role as Discussion Leader**
 - The group discussion needs a leader if it's to go anywhere in particular.
 - The group discussion leader should embrace the role as leader by managing the discussion, taking responsibility for its direction and tenor.
 - If the discussion is dragging on too long on one point, it's the leader's job to turn a corner and change the subject.
 - If the group is too quiet, it's the leader's job to spice up the discussion and engage people more directly by asking better questions, rephrasing, calling on people by name, changing the subject, etc.
 - If a member of the group is hijacking the discussion, or has changed the subject when there's still more to talk about, it's the leader's job to get back to the yet unfinished subject.

IV. Always Seek to Affirm People, Not Crush Them

- The leader should be skilled with people and sensitive to people's feelings, but also zealous for the truth of the topics to be drawn out. A good balance between love for people and love for truth is essential.
- If a participant gives a wrong answer, find a way to affirm *that* they answered, but not *what* they answered. Perhaps some part of the answer is true, so focus on that and skillfully affirm that part, but try to draw out the rest of the answer.
- The goal of this aspect is to get everyone energized in participating in a loving manner, not terrified to speak because their answer will be wrong and they will be humiliated.

V. Always Seek to Affirm Truth, Not Error

- Yet, on the other hand, the purpose of the group discussion in general is truth, not error.
- It is important to know how to draw out the truth and identify it by group means, and to reject error, while at the same time affirming people.
- Many issues are merely a matter of opinion, and the leader needs to know those as well. In those cases, the discussion is enriched by a variety of opinions. A good leader will “spice up” the discussion by drawing out those kinds of issues and getting a range of opinions.

VI. Ask Open-Ended, Directional Questions

- A central skill of a discussion leader is the power of asking good questions. Good discussion questions are never answered “Yes” or “No.” Those questions are total dead-ends for discussion.
- So also are answers that are so detailed and specific that only the leader knows what they could be. A leader should not be trying to get people to guess what he's thinking—that's frustrating to most participants.
- Questions should lead to fruitful discussion. They should be “directional,” toward a destination.

VII. Don't Be Afraid to Wait for Answers

- Especially early in the discussion, there may be awkward silences as the group is getting warmed up. If you are sure that the question is well-phrased and needs no adjustments, then wait for someone to answer.
- Don't try to fill in every gap with the sound of your voice.

VIII. Piggy-Back on Answers to Draw Out More Discussion

- As people give answers, take an aspect of their answer and piggy-back to ask that same person a follow-up question or to draw another person into what was just said.
- Look on a fruitful discussion like a campfire that must build and build as you add fuel to it.
- As each answer is given, draw others into the building campfire of interest.

IX. Don't Allow One Person to Dominate the Discussion

- Some people want to answer every question. Identify such people and limit their domination.
- Do this by directing specific questions to other individuals by name.
- Try not to have to get to the point where you ask the dominator to stop talking, because that might be humiliating to them. But skillfully manage the discussion so one person doesn't dominate.

X. Try to Spark Discussion Between Participants, Not Have Everything Go Through You

- Some leaders are so strong in their handling of a discussion that they speak every other time something is said. They ask a question, someone answers; then they ask the next question, someone answers; then they do the next speaking, etc. This is not ideal.
- Better to build a network of free flowing discussion that you as the leader manage.

XI. Know Who Can Handle Being Called Out By Name, And Use Those People Wisely

- Some people enjoy speaking and do not mind being called by name to answer. Identify such people and use them to manage the flow of discussion.
- Others do not feel comfortable being called on and will shrink back if you single them out.

XII. Know When to Move On to Cover the Whole Subject

- Manage the time wisely. Get through the whole journey.
- Part of this is knowing when it's time to change the subject.