

Fostering Discussion

Leader Huddle Discussion Guide

Ice Breaker:

- What topic of conversation could get you going for hours on end? Why?

Teaching: Fostering Discussion

In a small group, it can often be difficult to foster a good discussion. We may feel compelled to speak up more often than we'd like in order to keep the discussion going. We may have some people who dominate the conversation, while others never speak up at all. What do we do?

Today's lesson focuses on some ways we can be intentional about dealing with these issues and fostering productive discussion in our groups.

Silence

First, silence. Embrace it.

Yes, it seems counterintuitive to a good discussion, but silence isn't necessarily a bad thing.

It often can take people 30 to 60 seconds to formulate an answer to a complicated question. Which is a long time. [Optional: Stop speaking and be silent for 60 seconds.]

Don't jump in too soon. If the silence is following a question that's been posed, give people adequate time to think. If the question was posed by you, you've likely had time to think about it and compose your answer, so you may feel antsy. Fight the urge to break the silence too soon.

Of course, you also need to be a student of body language. If people are indicating cluelessness, rather than deep thought, you may want to rephrase the question or steer the discussion in a different direction. But make sure you aren't misreading the situation.

Talkers and Non-Talkers

Then there are the talkers. And the non-talkers.

Here again, discernment is called for. How are they wired?

Yes, some talkers may just like the sound of their own voice, but it's more likely they are verbal processors and that's how they learn. Are they interfering with discussion or are you just personally annoyed?

And the non-talkers – are they just naturally less talkative than the others? There’s nothing necessarily wrong with that.

However, if you feel there are problems that need to be addressed, you can take some steps to do so.

When you have small group members who talk too much, you may want to mention to the group before discussion that you are looking for brief answers and want as many people as possible to share. If that doesn’t work, it may be necessary to interrupt or cut off a talker mid-sharing, thanking them for what they said and asking another member for their thoughts or posing a new question. And if that fails, it may be necessary to speak to them one-on-one about it, possibly even leveraging the situation by asking them to help you get others in the group to share.

For non-talkers, embracing silence may give them the opportunity to process that they need. However, it may also be necessary to create openings for them to share, at times specifically asking them if they have anything they’d like to add and validating them when they share. Of course, you should always accept a “no” or “I don’t know” answer when asking if they want to share.

Also, with both talkers and non-talkers, make use of eye contact. By giving more to the non-talkers – perhaps by sitting directly across from them – and less to the talkers – perhaps by sitting next to them – you can subtly encourage the non-talkers to talk more and the talkers to talk less.

Good discussions don’t just happen. By being intentional about fostering a good discussion, you can help everyone in your group have a more productive and rewarding experience.

For more practical tips on leading a small group, check out the book “Field Guide for Small Group Leaders” by Sam O’Neal.

Discussion Questions:

- What’s your level of comfort with silence in a small group setting?
- Are you naturally more of a talker or a non-talker? If a talker, how can someone let you know you’re sharing too much? If a non-talker, how can others encourage you to share more?
- How can you tell when people are thinking about an answer versus simply not knowing how to respond?
- Have you had to address a situation with a talker or non-talker before? How did it go? Is there anything you’d do differently?
- What tricks do you use to help foster discussion in your small group?