

Success Secrets for Small Group Leaders

Knowing Your Purpose

One of the keys for a successful group experience is for the leader and members to know the purpose for the group meetings. Rather than simply meeting and hoping the time spent is worthwhile, knowing your purpose gives direction. It provides goals to strive for. *There are actually several purposes:*

1. Convey helpful information and insights.
2. Deepen individual relationships.
3. Build a sense of community and closeness. A “team spirit.”
4. Brainstorm ideas and dream together.
5. Support people who are experiencing challenges in life.
6. *The ultimate goal is for group members to grow* – spiritually, socially, mentally, and emotionally. Transformed lives is central. Group leaders and members cannot *make* that happen. Growth is an individual choice that someone makes to partner with the Holy Spirit to remodel some aspect of their life. But the group *can* create the atmosphere and conditions that foster growth by being accepting, non-judgmental, and loving. Growth also occurs in response to new understandings received from the lesson material.

Starting With Leaders In the Congregation

In order for God’s vision for the church to permeate your congregation, you will need to have as many of the key leaders as possible in the first groups to act as leaven and give you support in future decision making. Start with the inner core and work out from there to the rest of the congregation. Don’t forget to include “influencers” who may not hold official office but nonetheless can sway the thinking of others.

Be sure to include spouses in your invitation whenever possible. We have found that having only the husband or the wife catch the vision in the lessons can be frustrating to the other partner who often feels left out. It can also cause misunderstanding as one moves ahead of the other in their awareness of certain key issues and values.

Group Diversity

It can add spice to a group to get a mix of people: older/younger; single/couples; talkative/quiet; open/closed; longtime Adventist/new Adventist. This mix can help the group chemistry. One caution to keep in mind, however, is that the more divergent the ages, backgrounds, and theological perspectives of members, the more effort it may take to create a close bond of understanding and trust.

Potential group members should not be pushing an extreme theological or ideological agenda.

One good way to revive church members who are apathetic or on the verge of dropping out is to invite one or two of them to join the group. The group dynamic can become infectious as they associate with more active, enthusiastic members. Caution – don't put so many apathetic or disgruntled members in the group that they overwhelm the enthusiasm of others.

How To Invite People

You should invite potential group members personally, rather than making an announcement from up front. Try to meet them in their home or in a quiet, unhurried atmosphere so that you can share some of the vision that burns within your own heart. Don't try to tell a lot about the lessons at this point, just enough to capture their interest. Emphasize the potential for the church. Demonstrate an upbeat, *try it you'll like it*, attitude. People also need to hear what you think the lessons can *do for them personally*. It can open up new avenues for their Christian experience to be much more fulfilling and enjoyable.

The Group Atmosphere

It is very important to create a warm, inviting, friendly atmosphere each week. Before the meeting begins, have the host greet people at the door as they arrive. When people enter the group circle, welcome them by name and say how glad you are that they came. If the group meeting has already started when someone arrives, *stop the discussion immediately* and greet the late arrival. Never embarrass them by mentioning their tardiness. If they didn't attend a previous meeting, let them know how much they were missed. There is no need to offer refreshments.

Begin and end the meeting on time. Start on time no matter how few are there. Otherwise you teach people to be late. End on time no matter how animated the discussion. You want to leave them wanting more. The meeting should be 90 minutes.

Balancing Information and Relationships

It is important to balance learning and relationships. You need to cover what you and the members feel are the major points in the lesson. *But it is also vital to allow significant time for developing supportive, caring relationships.*

What is called the "Chemistry" of the group needs to be a major focus. It has to do with the relational dynamics within the group, the spirit, attitude, and feeling that is generated during the meetings. If the members never really engage one another in meaningful ways, the meetings will most likely become stilted and stale. *Chemistry can be intentionally developed in various ways:*

1. Chemistry is fostered by Ice Breakers, Group Activities, and Love In Action service opportunities in the lessons. These are not simply "add on's" to the lesson, but are essential teaching tools and relationship builders. Seek to create an experience, not just add to their knowledge.

2. “Chemistry” is also developed by paying attention to how the members interact with one another. Every meeting has ups and downs, but people’s overall sense needs to be one of gladness to be with the other members. Hugs, compliments, encouragement, humor, and storytelling help a lot here.
3. Chemistry is developed by getting to know people on more than a surface level. There are actually four levels of communication that can occur within the group:
 - Level 1 – *Cliché*. For example, “Sure is warm lately.”
 - Level 2 – *Reporting*. For example, “I haven’t mowed my lawn in two weeks.”
 - Level 3 – *Ideas*. People share their thoughts and views on various subjects. This helps us learn about them better than either Level 1 or 2. They are revealing more about themselves.
 - Level 4 – *Feelings*. People talk about being happy, optimistic, excited, troubled, worried, anxious, nervous, etc. *This is where we really get to know each other*. It is the feelings level where people open their hearts and go deeper.

Chemistry is developed best during Level 4 communication. *The discussion at group meetings should ideally fluctuate among the four different levels.* No one can be forced to share at Level 4, but they can be guided there by the example of the leader and also by crafting discussion questions that intentionally ask about feelings such as, “How would you feel if...”
4. Another key to “Chemistry” is when people grow and change through the group process. Changed lives is the most exciting thing that can happen in a group setting. Group members always find it compelling when someone says, “This discussion has helped me shed a lot of guilt,” or “I am much more hopeful after studying this lesson together.”

It is always helpful to *take time spontaneously during the meetings to pray* briefly for personal needs that are expressed during the discussion or to sing choruses of rejoicing over good news. *We want the members to experience true body life.* Look at the trend over several lessons rather than being too concerned if one night is imbalanced toward either too much time on information or too much time spent on relationships.

It is a truism that “Communication = Content + Relationship.” If you want people to open up, *help them feel safe and valued* by getting to know each other and building bonds of trust.

Presenting the Lesson Material

Various methods may be used in presenting the lessons. Don’t start a group meeting by simply saying, “So, what did you think of the lesson this week.” Consider carefully the following possibilities and use a *combination* that works best for you:

1. Tell members you will conduct the meeting with the assumption that they have already read the lesson. Invite them to help make the evening a success by investing time in study and reflection.

2. Nothing will get the members to NOT study the lesson better than going over every little detail at the meeting. They think, “Why study ahead of time, we’re going to over it all at the meeting anyway.” *Use the material to cover significant points, but avoid slavishly going over it in detail.*
3. Go through the lesson one section at a time asking the members what meant the most to them or what issues were raised in their minds.
4. Divide the lesson up according to the different themes/subjects.
5. Focus on illustrations in the material. Most people think in concrete terms and can be most easily drawn into a discussion based on specific experiences and situations.
6. Call attention to the Discussion Questions, the ones in the lesson and your own. Members will often have thought about these ahead of time and are looking forward to sharing.

Creating Effective Discussion Questions

Spend a significant part of your preparation time thinking up good discussion questions. There are discussion questions in the lesson itself, but you need to have three or four others you can use if necessary. Plan ahead. The following are some guidelines for developing effective group questions:

1. Ask yourself, “Do I really want a discussion?” The answer is not always “yes.” Some group leaders inwardly love to teach and turn the small group into a kind of min-classroom. Others are somewhat fearful of an animated discussion because they don’t feel in control. They can also be afraid that some question might be asked that they can’t answer or don’t know how to handle.
2. *Don’t make your questions trite or simplistic.* They don’t need to be something a seminary professor would puzzle over, but if they are too obvious then people will lose interest.
3. *Don’t ask questions that have only one right answer.* You will not get much discussion by asking, “How many disciples did Jesus have?” If people are afraid they might give a wrong answer they will be quiet. But if there is room for a variety of answers and opinions, then they can jump in without fear. A better question might be, “How would you have felt if you were one of Jesus’ disciples during the last week of His life?”
4. Discussion-stopping questions usually begin with:
 - “When”
 - “How many...?”
 - “Where” or
 - “Who”

These often lead to only one right answer.

It is usually much better to create questions that begin with:

- “How”
- “Why”

“If”

These questions leave room for a variety of valid answers and make it easier for shy people to participate.

Leading the Discussion

Initially you may have to do more talking just to get the ball rolling. Ideally the group itself will soon do most of the talking and responding. Draw out what the Holy Spirit is teaching *them* through the lesson material. Help them interact with and learn from one another. Their own thinking will deepen as various thoughts and feelings mingle. Members of the group should expect to shape one another’s ideas and experience.

When people pose a question to the group or contribute to the discussion, be sure to affirm them by saying something like, “That’s a great question/point,” or other encouraging phrases. *That is one of the best ways to get people to open up.*

Keep the discussion on task, but let it flow toward that which is of most interest to the members. It is not easy to find the balance between breadth and depth, quantity and quality.

Try hard to keep the lines of communication going between the group members rather than always coming back to you. You may have to tell people to respond to others and not always back in your direction. When someone makes a comment to you, turn it back to the group by asking, “Who would like to respond to Frank’s comment?” or “How do the rest of you feel about what Frank is saying?” It is important that you not be viewed as the “Answer man/woman.”

Let the group know that it is vital that all discussions in the group are confidential.

Make good use of “case studies” or examples that are either actual or fictional situations that illustrate some aspect of the lesson. They should be in the nature of some problem that needs to be resolved. People are drawn to real-life experiences.

Don’t judge people’s answers. Nothing will close people up faster than making them feel like they made a mistake. *Avoid having anyone label others as being “wrong.”* It is better to say something like, “I guess I see it a different way.” Create a safe atmosphere. It is a “no-put-down” zone.

Don’t be afraid of conflicting opinions or try to smooth over all differences. It is OK for people to disagree, even strongly, as long as they don’t put others down or label them. *An energized environment invites participation.*

Don't be afraid of silences. Sometimes people just need a few moments to gather their thoughts. Blank spaces can provide opportunity for reflection. They also help vary the pace of the meeting as well.

Remember, discussion cannot be an end in itself. You could get an animated discussion going about politics or the death penalty, but that's not related to the lesson. The goal is *meaningful discussion*. If the group spends most of the evening debating church standards, you have probably missed the point.

Don't stray too far from the theme of the lesson. If you don't stay focused on the subject matter of the lesson, people won't bother studying ahead of time because they know what they studied won't be discussed anyway. You can get people back on track by saying something like, "This has been a very interesting discussion, but I think we better get back into the lesson or else we'll run out of time."

Don't play "twenty questions." It is very annoying for a group leader to try and make members guess what they are thinking. The leader usually says something like, "Guess what the highest mountain in Asia is?" After the members offer various wrong answers the leader jumps gleefully and says, "Nope. None of those is correct. The actual answer is..." Don't play such games with people.

Dealing With Monopolizers

You need to deal with a monopolizer kindly but directly to keep them from dominating the discussion. Small groups are a place for mutual discovery not pontification about one's own agenda. *Don't ever allow the meeting to become a lecture by anyone.* Here are some techniques that can be effective:

1. Sometimes you may have to interrupt a rambling monologue: "Hold it right there Pete. You're tossing out a number of worthwhile ideas, but I'm not sure we can handle all of them at once. Take your first point, boil it down to one simple sentence, and we'll see what others think about it."
2. You can also use affirmation, "Bill, you know a lot more about this than others in the group. I'm afraid your knowledge might intimidate them. How about hanging back a while so they can get in their licks without feeling stupid?"
3. You can also speak with them after the group meeting sometime and say, "Mary, I have a problem and I am wondering if you could help me. You may have noticed that we have several members who don't say much during the meeting. We need to try and get them involved so we can hear their perspective. Could you help me in that?"
4. Finally, if all else fails, you'll need to meet with them personally and ask them directly to take up less of the meeting time.

5. Be kind and respectful, but you cannot afford to ignore the problem or else it will take the life out of the group.

Sometimes group members have certain personal needs, emotionally or spiritually, that seem to take over group life week after week. For instance, it seems that no matter what the topic, Joe always talks about recently being fired from his job. Again, you'll need to meet with them personally and help them find the assistance they need. *Help them discover other outlets for their hurts so they won't overwhelm the group agenda on a regular basis.* If that is not possible, then you may need to sympathize deeply with their hurt, but use some of the same techniques you would for any domineering person.

Working With Shy People

Encourage shy people to participate by *making them the experts*. Think ahead of time how you can tap into their experience and expertise to illustrate a point in the lesson. For instance, ask the homemakers how important it is to put all of the ingredients in a recipe, to illustrate that we are all important to the church. Have they ever left something out of a recipe and what were the results? Or ask someone who is a mechanic about the different systems in a car and how they work together to illustrate the way members need to work in harmony. Everyone is an expert on their own life; which can become a bridge to other areas of learning.

How to Develop Effective Group Members

The success of any group meeting depends at least as much on the effectiveness of each group member as it does on the effectiveness of the leader. The Spiritual Body Building lessons contain material at the beginning of each lesson on how to be an effective small group member. Be sure to cover these each week. For lessons that don't have that material, you can develop the groups' own guidelines by using the following approach:

Tell the group members that you are looking forward to a great time together, but that the success of the group will depend on everyone in the group, not just the leader. Bring a large piece of white paper and write on it *their suggestions* for how the group members will relate to each other during the discussion. *If any of the following are not on their final list, you should add them to the list yourself:*

1. Avoid using "oughts" and "shoulds." These words only engender guilt and are not helpful.
2. Speak for yourself. Use "I" and "Me" instead of "We" and "Us." Each of us can only speak for ourselves and should not impose our views on others.
3. Do not discount. When someone shares a problem they are having, don't discount it by replying, "Oh, that's not a big deal." If they share it then it is a big deal for them.
4. Participate, don't dominate. It is helpful not to talk too much or too little. Monitor yourself. Help people who are more shy and reserved to feel comfortable sharing. Strive for equality of input.

5. Listen well. “Active listening” means giving people your full attention while they are talking and making an effort to listen for the meaning and feeling *behind their words*. Concentrate on what *they* are saying rather than simply waiting for a chance to share your own thoughts.
6. Read the lesson. Invest in the group by reading the material ahead of time. When you come unprepared it detracts from the experience of the group.
7. Focus on both information and relationships. *How we treat each other as we learn is as important as the learning itself.*
8. Members need to arrive on time *for the sake of the group as a whole.*
9. Be slow to give advice and counsel on how others should deal with their problems.
10. Keep the discussion on the topic.

IMPORTANT: Emphasize that in order for the group experience to be a happy and rewarding one it is up to the group members to let the group know when they feel a rule is being ignored or forgotten. Try to find some humorous way for people to call attention to a broken rule such as saying “*The bucket has a hole in it*” and then describe the problem. Remind them that we are all students in training and need to hold each other up. We need to be gentle and supportive and not to put anyone down.

Various Other Issues

Use humor. Few things relax people more than laughter. Illustrations from your own life are usually the most effective.

One of the most effective ways of getting people to study the lesson ahead of time is to ask them to lead out in part of the next meeting. You should provide coaching ahead of time and lots of affirmation. Not everyone is ready to take on the responsibility for an entire evening, but they may lead out in discussing some piece of the lesson.

Don’t try to summarize at the end of the meeting what everyone said. You can review key points in the lesson or comments from others, but if you try to summarize discussion you will inevitably make someone feel short-changed and misunderstood. It is OK to leave loose ends.

The best time to end a meeting is when no one wants to! It makes them eager to come back. You can end on time, but invite anyone who wants to discuss further *to stay after*. You need to honor meeting start and stop times.

Monitor the temperature. If the room is too small, too stuffy, too warm, or too cold, people’s minds will be distracted. Also provide everyone with comfortable seating.

Feedback on How You Are Doing

Part way through the lesson series, it can be helpful to ask members how they feel about the approach you are taking to the lesson presentation. You may want to get written feedback because people will rarely share something negative with the whole group. It can also be enlightening to ask a couple of group members with whom you feel very comfortable to confidentially share with you how they feel things are going.

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