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## **Emphasize Relationships in Your Group**

*How to set the stage for real friendships*

By Mark Ingmire

When we talk about the key parts of a small group, we usually talk about the Bible study, sharing, prayer, group mission, or outreach. Because we see these as the most important elements, our leader training focuses on doing those things well. However, there's one part of group life which we don't pay as much attention to, yet has huge importance: relationships. Though we may spend little time training how to build, deepen, and maintain friendships within the group, we can't ignore them if we want groups to be healthy. And we can't assume they'll naturally develop.

Consider for a moment a small group without deep relationships. This group will be made up of simple acquaintances who don't do much to support one another. They'll hold in hurt and disagreements rather than seek to forgive wrongs committed against each other because they're not invested in the relationships. They won't respond to needs that are expressed, assuming someone else will take care of it. And they won't experience much life change together because depth and accountability simply aren't present.

Without a strong emphasis on relationships, the best thing a small group can do is impart head knowledge. That same knowledge, when discussed in an environment that promotes relationships, has the power to move from the head to the heart. Group members allow that knowledge to impact them, and they seek to apply it. That's when life change happens. So let's look at how we can model and emphasize healthy and life-changing relationships within small groups.

### **Make the Group Safe**

You can establish a few guidelines during the group's discussion that will help foster relationships. Introduce these guidelines before you jump into your study time to help you model how a healthy, life-changing group functions.

### **Be Transparent**

One of my greatest frustrations is group members who respond to questions with superficial answers. To help with this, you'll need to model transparent sharing, talking about your real needs, struggles, and frustrations. Your group can tell if you're being transparent or superficial, and they'll follow your lead. You may find that it isn't easy being transparent, but it's important to try. The more you practice, the easier it will be. Your transparency will give your group members permission to be transparent, sharing their true selves with the group. This is part of tilling the soil of relationships.

### **Don't Rescue**

When people share an experience which has deeply impacted them, it's our tendency to try to make them feel better about the situation or about themselves. This is especially true if a group member gets emotional. I have heard people say, "God will use that situation," or "It will be okay." Although both of these sentiments may be true, they quickly shut down further sharing. Rather than responding with these sentiments, allow time to pause and reflect, thank them for sharing, and perhaps respond by saying "I'm so sorry," or "That sounds like a really tough situation."

This is especially important when group members have difficulty expressing themselves. Perhaps they're stuttering or searching for the words to express what they're thinking. Rather than allow them the space to sort it out and say what they're thinking and feeling, we try to rush in and rescue them by putting words into their mouths. We must recognize that this is because *we* feel uncomfortable, not because it's helpful to the people

sharing. Rather than rush in to try to finish their thoughts for them, be patient and allow them to express themselves. After they've shared, you can always ask questions to clarify what they meant.

### **No Side Conversations**

If you begin a side conversation while another person is sharing, it communicates that you're not listening and, worse, that you don't care about what's being said. When someone is sharing in the group, give your full attention to him or her. If group members try to start a side conversation with you, steer their attention to the person sharing with the group.

### **Don't Fix**

Here are actual pieces of advice I've heard in small-group discussions:

- I think you should sue their pants off.
- You need to pray harder and read your Bible more.
- You need to just get over it.

Giving advice is extremely dangerous. First, the advice given is often bad advice. Second, the person sharing usually isn't asking for advice. Instead of giving advice, listen and ask follow-up questions to help the person unpack the situation. The best way to advance the conversation without giving advice is simply to recognize the situation's importance. Saying something like, "Wow, I'm so sorry you're in this situation," expresses your empathy and concern for the situation, yet doesn't give any advice.

A mistake group leaders often make is jumping in too early to say, "Let's pray about this." Realistically, not everyone is ready to pray about an issue they bring up. Rather than jump to conclusions about the best way to pray for the situation, ask follow-up questions that help the group member clarify the issue and better understand his or her thoughts and feelings. You might ask, "So how did that make you feel?" or "What are your concerns with this situation?" Before heading to prayer, consider asking what the person would like prayer for. Too often the way we pray for others consists of giving advice. For instance, someone might pray, "Give Lauren the courage to speak up to Tony," when Lauren hasn't said anything about desiring to speak up to him. This kind of advice-giving will shut down the group member from sharing in the future.

### **Use "I" Statements**

When group members use "we" in regards to how they feel or think, they remove themselves from the ownership of their statement. For instance, a group member might say, "We all struggle with forgiving others," in an effort to keep the conversation more surface-level. When we use the word "I," we take ownership. So, using our example, a group member should instead say, "I struggle to forgive my mom for what she's done." Using "I" statements communicates that you trust your fellow group members enough to be honest with them about your thoughts and feelings. If you model using "I" statements, your group members will follow suit.

### **We Don't All Have to Agree**

Whenever people gather, there are bound to be disagreements—even if they're over silly things like the type of snacks to bring. For some reason, though, in small groups we often feel that we should all agree on everything. But that's simply not true. There's a big difference between sharing an opinion and trying to convince everyone else in the group that they should share your opinion. If group members feel others will just try to convince them of the "right" way to think, they won't share their own opinions. Remember that freedom to share is an indispensable part of being a small group. Without this safety, group members won't share, and you likely won't experience much life change together.

### **Learn to Really Listen**

Pay attention to the group member who is sharing. Practice being an active listener. Show interest by keeping good eye contact, nodding your head, leaning slightly toward the speaker, and reflecting back to the group member what has been shared. Don't be distracted by texting, thinking up your next response, or watching the clock. Group members feel valued when they know that you're listening. (For more on listening well, check out [Become a Great Listener](#).)

## **Stay In Touch Between Meetings**

There are 168 hours in one week. If your group meets for 2 hours every week, there are 166 hours where life is happening for your group members. Every hour that passes separates group members a little more, which means you'll have to spend quite a bit of time reconnecting at each meeting.

While there's nothing wrong with taking time to reconnect at meetings, you can help minimize this dynamic by modeling how to keep in touch with group members between meetings and encouraging others to do the same. In order to do this, make sure group members have each other's contact information. That keeps you from being the bottleneck for developing relationships. If someone is absent from one of your group meetings, for instance, anyone in the group is able to contact him or her without having to get the information from you first.

Staying in touch between meetings also helps you prepare for future meetings. The conversations you have during the week will help you get to know your group members better which helps you know how best to lead. Your group members may feel more comfortable sharing with you or others individually rather than with the entire small group.

## **Care for Group Members**

Talk is cheap. You can say that you care about your group members as much as you want, but if you never actually do anything to take care of them, your words won't mean anything. The axiom proves true: Actions speak louder than words.

In order for relationships to grow, you'll have to engage in meaningful acts of service. There are several simple things you can do as a leader to model and emphasize serving one another. It doesn't necessarily mean mowing their lawn or doing their laundry—unless that's what they really need. Rather, there are lots of simple things you can do to let people know you care.

## **Celebrate Birthdays**

It may seem overly simple, but recognizing and celebrating group members' birthdays is a great way to care for them. Plus, it gives your group a reason to party, which is always fun. Don't pass up this easy way to serve your members.

## **Celebrate Special Occasions**

Be attentive to what your small-group members are involved in outside of group life. When a group member graduates from school, gets a promotion, or earns recognition in your community, celebrate! Likewise, if group members are participating in a local play, coordinating a community event, or excelling on a sports league, attend their events and cheer them on. Being there for your group members' interests and achievements will go a long way in communicating that you care.

## **Have Dinner Together**

Over the course of a few months, have each group member over to your home for a home cooked meal. Sharing a meal is a very personal way to build relationships with people in your group, and it helps them feel valued. Alternatively, invite pairs of group members over for dinner not only to develop your relationship with each of them but also to foster a relationship between the two group members.

## **Quickly Address Needs**

When a group member expresses a need for help, don't let your only response be, "Let's pray about that." It's great to pray, but you'll also want to see if there's anything you or the group can do to help. If you're not sure what might help, ask.

As you begin to invest in relationships within your group, you'll see deeper sharing and more life change happening. Never underestimate the importance of healthy relationships in a group. If you want to see growth, you'll need to invest in relationships.

—MARK INGMIRE is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

**Discuss**

1. How safe is your group for developing deep relationships? What can you do to make it safer?
2. Name three ways you could keep in touch with your group members between meetings. How well are you doing this currently?
3. How well do you care for your group members? What's one thing you can do in the next week to do this better?