

This Is Why They Call You a "Leader"

And what you're supposed to do because of it

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A great many people seem confused about how small-group leaders should view themselves these days, especially in terms of what they should do in the Bible-study portion of a group gathering. One of the ways this confusion manifests itself is in the variety of titles that are now used to identify the person(s) leading a group—from facilitator, to host, to shepherd, and so on. But a far more dangerous manifestation occurs when group leaders attempt to carry out their roles without clarity and confidence, resulting in a hesitant exploration of truth and stunted transformation for group members.

Below are several guidelines and principles that will help identify what a small-group leader is not, what a small-group leader should be, and what a small-group leader should do when it comes to exploring truth in community.

What a Small-Group Leader Is Not

It's true that different churches have different goals for their small-groups ministries, which can result in different nuances in the job descriptions of their small-group leaders. But generally speaking, a small-group leader should not be viewed *primarily* as:

- **A teacher.** We all understand that small-group leaders should not be lecturers who monopolize the group's time by spewing out facts and opinions. But I use the word *teacher* here intentionally in order to highlight an important misconception: many group leaders believe that the focus of their group's study time should be the transfer of information. They feel that a study is successful if their group members have learned something. But that is not the case, as we will see below.
- **Just another group member.** This is the opposite of the "group leader as professor" approach, but it's just as harmful. Many churches like to teach that their group leaders are no different than group members because they want to communicate that group members are just as important and valuable as group leaders—which is true. But being equal in terms of worth and value does not mean that people have to adopt the same roles and functions. The reality is that a small group with no leader will rarely move forward.
- **A host.** This has become a popular re-definition of what it means to be a small-group leader in recent years, primarily due to the influence of video curriculum. The idea is that a person or couple can host a small group in their home, pop in a DVD, and let a "professional" handle the task of leading the group into meaningful experiences with truth. But there is one major flaw inherent in this method of "leading" a small group: a DVD cannot respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit. What happens when a group members is convicted of sin during the discussion and begins weeping? Who calls the group to prayer when group members confess to being in danger of losing their house or

their marriage? These situations require a leader who can take control and help the group follow the Spirit.

- **A facilitator.** Many churches want their group leaders to think of themselves as facilitators, rather than leaders. This is done to combat the "small-group leader as professor" problem referred to earlier, but it creates several problems of its own. Just as viewing group leaders primarily as teachers elevates learning over transformation, viewing them as facilitators elevates discussion over transformation. A study session is deemed successful if the group had a good conversation and a high level of participation, rather than basing the criteria for success on interaction with the Holy Spirit and seeing lives changed.

Let me be clear about one thing: I'm not saying that small-group leaders should avoid demonstrating any of these qualities. Quite the opposite—group leaders should be able to facilitate discussion, host a gathering, and teach when necessary. But I think that churches go wrong when they make any of these skills the primary focus of a group leader's role.

What a Small-Group Leader Should Be

So, what is the primary focus that small-group leaders *should* adopt? The answer is that of a spiritual safari guide. That will need some explaining, I know, but first give some thought to the following two principles of small-group leadership:

Principle 1: Small-group leaders are to be most concerned about the spiritual transformation of their group members. Everything else involved with leading a small group—recruiting new members, choosing Bible studies, resolving conflict—are secondary issues and should be subordinate to the spiritual growth of the people involved. If people gather together to enjoy each other's company, eat good food, sing songs, maybe do a service project, but don't grow closer to Jesus Christ as a result, they have only created a Christianized version of a Kiwanis Club. Not a small group.

Principle 2: Small-group leaders are never able to manufacture spiritual transformation within their group members. This is something that small-group leaders must understand. We cannot force our group members to grow spiritually any more than we could force them to grow taller. No matter how good we become at facilitating discussion questions, resolving conflict, and making nachos, our people will not become more like Jesus unless they are carried there by the Holy Spirit.

These two principles seem contradictory, at first. If small-group leaders are primarily tasked with a job that only the Holy Spirit can fulfill, how can they lead well? The answer is relatively simple: group leaders need to create environments and experiences that allow group members to connect with the Holy Spirit.

And that's what I mean when I talk about small-group leaders as spiritual safari guides.

Can you imagine a safari where the guide spent all of your time talking about flora and fauna instead of actually taking you into the jungle? Or encouraged the tour members to discuss what they felt a rhinoceros might look and sound like, rather than leading everyone to an actual specimen? Or took off his binoculars and said, "Don't ask me where to go; I'm as lost as the rest of you." Such is the folly of a small-group leader who does not lead—who does not bring his or her group members into the presence of the Holy Spirit by directing expeditions into the mysteries of God's Word, the elements of Truth in this world, and the life stories of other people.

What a Small-Group Leader Should Do

Here are a few more guidelines and tips that can help group leaders better understand and execute their role as spiritual safari guides.

This doesn't have to create more work. If you're a small-group leader, you don't have to start spending an extra 10 hours a week trying to manufacture "spiritual" experiences for your group members—or 1 extra hour, for that matter. Taking up your mantle as a spiritual safari guide is more of a shift in focus. Instead of focusing your attention on getting people to learn something or like each other or talk more, you're focusing your attention on what the Holy Spirit is doing in your group (and helping your group members do the same).

This doesn't negate everything you've learned At SmallGroups.com, we spend a lot of time helping group leaders learn various skills and practices to be used during group meetings. These include writing effective discussion questions, understanding learning styles, interpreting body language, incorporating worship, and so on. And all of those are still important. Think of it like falling asleep. You can't force another person to fall asleep, but you can create an environment around that person that is more conducive to sleep. In the same way, you can't force your group members to encounter and interact with the Holy Spirit, but you can create an environment in your small group that is receptive to the Spirit's movement. And all of the skills mentioned above are helpful for creating such an environment.

... But all of the skills you've learned should be subordinate to prayer. The founders of www.smallgroupsbigimpact.com studied over 1,000 churches to answer this question: what are the common traits of healthy small groups? They found that, overwhelmingly, healthy small groups have group leaders that pray for their group members every day. And that makes sense when you understand that the Holy Spirit is responsible for spiritual growth and health. If you want an efficient group meeting that disseminates a lot of information, than spend most of your time learning facilitation skills and studying commentaries. If you want your small group to be a place where spiritual growth happens, than spend most of your time in prayer.

—Sam O'Neal is the managing editor of www.SmallGroups.com; copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.