

Leading an Effective Discussion

Provide the Right Environment:

1. People must have time to think.
2. People must feel safe to state their opinion.

DO's

Use discussable questions. For example: "What are the first four books of the New Testament?" is not discussable - there is only one correct answer. "Why do you think four different gospels are included in the Bible?" is discussable. Thinking of good questions will be your most important task in leading an inductive Bible Study (see Build Your Own Bible Study).

Minimize leader talk. The more you talk, the less they will.

Redirection: Have several people answer the same question. For example:

Leader: *What does Ephesians 5 mean to you?*

Gertrude: *I didn't get anything out of it.*

Leader: *Hmmm. Harriet? (Didn't repeat question.)*

Harriet: *Oh, I totally disagree. It has the most lasting truths of our faith.*

Leader: *(Nods to Beatrice. Doesn't say anything.)*

Beatrice: *Well, it made me realize I wasn't very loving to my brother.*

Leader: *That's interesting. Did anyone else get a practical application?...Sylvia?*

Leader picked up on last comment to form new question. Leader needs to stay in control of discussion, but doesn't have to talk incessantly.

Prompting: If you ask a question no one can answer, scale the question down or give people some direction. For example:

Leader: *How could Isaiah's vision in the temple benefit the modern church?*

Group: *(Blank looks)*

Leader: *Isaiah had a vision of God as holy and lifted up. Do you think most Christians today are overwhelmed by God's holiness? How would that change our lives?*

Ask for Clarification: Have people elaborate on their ideas. For example:

Leader: *What can we learn from Abraham's obedience?*

Esmerelda: *Discipline.*

Leader: *Oh yes, that's good. What can we learn about discipline from Abraham?*

Give Positive Reinforcement: "Good idea", "excellent", "so true", frequent smiles or head nods go a long way to encouraging people to feel safe in discussions.

But what if someone is totally off the wall? Try to reinforce as much of the answer as possible. For example:

Leader: *What does Jesus' death on the cross mean to us?*

Billy Sue: *It means we can get drunk every night and cheat on tests because God will forgive us.*

Leader: *Forgiveness! That really is the key issue when we think of the cross. You sure are right in that. But what do you think our response to God's forgiveness should be? ...Earlene?*

Call on Non-Volunteers: After asking a question, pause and look several people in the eye. This will make them think you are going to call on them. About 50% of the time,

call on someone to answer. But ALWAYS give people time to think. Don't say "Bob, what is your favorite book of the Bible?" Say, "What is your favorite book of the Bible?...(pause, look several people in the eye), Bob?"

DON'Ts

Don't echo. Don't repeat people's answers. If they can't be heard, ask them to repeat it.

Don't answer your own questions. See prompting above.

Don't look for one answer. "That's good, but it's not quite what I'm looking for," will kill a discussion. If you want to make one point - use a lecture or other appropriate method.

Don't tell people they are wrong. Try to avoid saying, "You're wrong," or, "I think you made a mistake, Bettylou." See the example under positive reinforcement for ideas on how to handle this. Don't leave an obvious error unchallenged. Make sure the discussion brings out the right ideas. But you don't have to tell someone in front of a group that they were wrong - they will figure it out.

Don't let one or two people dominate. Use redirection and call on non-volunteers to try to handle this situation. "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken up yet." If necessary, talk to the dominating person privately. Look for ministry opportunities - why does this person feel the need to talk so much? How can we help him grow in this area?

Don't interrupt. Let people finish what they are saying.

Don't probe. Encourage people to share what they want to, but don't make them share what they don't want to. If someone in the group starts to probe, say, "Let's let Jill tell it the way she sees it." or "Why don't we let Jill finish what she has to say."

Don't give advice. Advice is cheap and sometimes disastrous. If someone else in the group has had an experience that is applicable to the person's situation, allow him to share it. But do not go on to draw the conclusion for the person. If the person specifically asks for advice, tell what you might do in a similar situation.

WHAT IF...

I'm trying to do everything right and our group still won't discuss?

Let people write down ideas first and then call on several volunteers to share what they've written.

Have people discuss the questions with the person sitting next to them and then bring ideas to the whole group.