

Planning and Leading a Life-Changing Meeting

By John Angle,
adapted from
“Planning and Leading a Life-Changing Meeting”
breakout session at
Willow Creek Small Groups Conference

Small group experiences should be life changing. Discover the four basic ingredients of meetings that can be transformational for yourself and your group members.

Goal:

For small group leaders to identify proven strategies to plan, execute, and evaluate your meetings so that they will be memorable and create significant impact in the lives of those who attend.



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CONTENTS

Leader's Guide

» How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change
4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions
» Types of Questions
5. Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources

How to use "Planning and Leading a Life-Changing Meeting"

The following materials can be used for either personal or group training to increase the effectiveness of small groups.

Training Others

If you use this material to train other leaders, you may want to modify the handouts as necessary. Personalize them by printing on church letterhead or adding your church logo to the design. Each handout can be used in separate, brief training sessions, or you can combine all of the materials into one session.

Read through the materials and any listed Scriptures ahead of time. Then prepare the materials as needed:

- Make enough copies for all of the participants.
- Provide food, drink, and other materials that will make your training sessions more comfortable.

Allow five minutes for everyone to read through each handout. Then discuss the questions provided, or consider questions such as:

- "Why are these principles important for a successful small group?"
- "How well does your small group currently incorporate these principles?"
- "What one or two practical things could we do in the next year to improve in this area?"

Pray

Ask God to show you the areas you need to change in order to make your small group a place of life change.

Leader's Guide

» How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change
4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions
 - » Types of Questions
5. Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources

Ingredient #1: Using Icebreakers

Learn how to effectively begin your meeting with icebreakers.

Proverbs 1:5

Life-changing meetings need a strong starting point. Icebreakers are lighthearted questions that get your group talking. They are simple questions, but have great value for your group.

The Starting Point of Discipleship

Discipleship begins with the icebreakers. These questions are not simply to get people talking for the sake of talking. They're where learning and life change begin.

Good Diagnostic Tools

Think of icebreakers as good diagnostic tools. They help you figure out how things are going in the lives of your group members. You can discover many things about people as they answer these initial questions. Consider what you might learn from questions such as: Are you a rule keeper or a rule breaker? What are your pet peeves? What is one thing you appreciate about your spouse?

How To Lead with Icebreakers

1. *Bring out the child before you bring out the adult.* Let people have fun with some questions to break down the barriers. Then you can move on to the deeper questions.
2. *Move from the outside to the inside, from the past to the present.* Move from external circumstances to internal feelings. Talk about something from your past, and compare or relate it to what's happening in the present.
3. *Set the tone of the meeting.* Will it be a lighthearted meeting or a deep, thoughtful one? Choose icebreakers that will set an appropriate tone.
4. *Let everyone say something.* Consider this time to be a warm-up for the meeting, where everyone gets to hear their own voice so they'll be more likely to speak up later.
5. *Expect everyone to participate.* Draw shy members out of their shells by asking them to answer a non-threatening icebreaker question. If you have someone who refuses to talk, consider talking to him or her one-on-one and say, "We'd really love for you to contribute. You have a lot to offer this group. How can I help you do that?"
6. *Answer first to set the example.* If you, as the leader, open the discussion, people will take their cues from you. They will understand how they're expected to respond.
7. *Don't stop using icebreakers.* No matter how many years your group meets together, you still need to use icebreakers to get things started.

Discussion

- How do you start your meetings? What might you need to change?
- Do you give everyone the chance to say something? Why or why not? What are some ways you can encourage everyone to speak?
- Do you think it's important to answer all questions yourself? Why or why not?

Leader's Guide

» How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change
4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions
 - » Types of Questions
5. Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources

HANDOUT #1

Ingredient #2: Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum

Discover the best focus for a small group.

1 Corinthians 13:1–3

“To teach is to create a space where obedience to truth can be practiced.”

(Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1993)

Most small groups veer toward one end of the truth-life continuum. Some focus heavily on biblical truth and neglect application to life. Other groups pay so much attention to life application that they fail to relate it to biblical truth. The goal is a balance between truth and life.

The Truth-Life Continuum

Where does your group land on the truth-life continuum?

TRUTH ←————→ LIFE

When groups veer toward either end of the continuum, the results can be destructive. Groups need a mixture of both truth and life.

Truth-Life Comparison Chart

Look at this chart to see how each type of group compares to the other.

TRUTH-FOCUSED GROUPS	LIFE-FOCUSED GROUPS
Know the answers to the questions	Know the answers to their problems
Focus on information—What does it mean?	Focus on introspection—How do I feel?
Reward members for being right	Reward members for being real
Community is built on principle of agreement	Community is built on principle of acceptance
The goal is a well-informed student	The goal is a well-understood self

None of the above characteristics are inherently bad. However, when one side is embraced at the expense of the other, things can go wrong. Your group will begin to fall apart.

Where Truth Meets Life

Create a place where the truth about God intersects with the truth about you. The place where truth meets life is called love. Groups whose focus is the love of Christ and the love of others will tend to press toward the center of the continuum.

TRUTH ←————→ LOVE ←————→ LIFE

The Characteristics of Love-Focused Groups

See how the characteristics of love-centered groups differ from (or combine) the characteristics of truth- or life-focused groups.

Leader's Guide

» How to Use This Material

Training Materials

- Using Icebreakers
- Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
- Planning for Discussion and Life Change
- Asking the Right Kind of Questions
 - » Types of Questions
- Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources

HANDOUT #2

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LOVE-FOCUSED GROUPS

Know the truth about God and man
Focus on transformation—How am I becoming like Christ?
Reward members for being honest with God and others
Community is built on principle of authenticity
The goal is a well-ordered heart

The Truth-Life Principle

Teach people what you want them to know; then discuss how to apply that truth to their lives.

Discuss

- What needs to happen to move your group toward the center of the truth-life continuum?
- Why do you think most groups fall apart when they move toward the ends of the continuum?
- What are your thoughts on the Parker Palmer quote at the beginning of the section? Do you think it puts too much emphasis on the teacher? Why or why not?

Leader's Guide

» How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. **Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum**
3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change
4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions
 - » Types of Questions
5. Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources

Ingredient #3: Planning for Discussion and Life Change

Understand the importance of planning and how to carry it out.

Proverbs 16:3

It's important to have a plan for each meeting, even though the plan may change during the course of the meeting. You need to allow for the Holy Spirit to lead the meeting, but it's also imperative that you let the Spirit lead your planning. And remember, variety is the spice of life, so don't let your group get in a rut!

What Could Happen?

If God showed up at one of your meetings like you have been praying and expecting him to, what would happen? Share your answer with a partner.

That simple question can elicit several responses and emotions:

- Conviction—Perhaps you couldn't answer the question because you have been discouraged and don't expect God to do anything in your meetings. Or perhaps you have neglected to pray for your meetings.
- Hope—God *will* answer your prayers for your group. When you ask him for help, he will surely give it to you.
- Motivation—The result of hope is motivation. If you believe God will answer your prayers, you will be more likely to invest your energy in positive ways.
- Relief—When you believe God is in control of what happens in your group, you take the pressure off of yourself. You don't have to do it all, but you do have the responsibility of putting a plan in place.

PLAN Acronym

Use the following acronym to help remember the four major steps of planning.

P = Purpose. With God's help and guidance, what are you trying to achieve? What is your goal for your group members?

L = Logistics. What requires attention to ensure a focused, distraction-free environment? Make a plan for location, how often you'll meet, and the pattern of group life.

A = Activities. What will you actually do and how much time will be devoted to it? Apart from sitting around a table and studying the Bible or a curriculum, what will you do? How will you serve and live life together?

N = Needs. What needs exist among your group members that will require prayer and attention?

Discussion

- What do you think is the balance between planning and letting the Spirit lead?
- Are you a planner? If so, what are some of your planning secrets? If not, what can you do to become a better planner?
- Have you ever considered that discovering people's needs should be a big part of your meeting? Why or why not? What might you need to change?

Leader's Guide

» How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
- 3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change**
4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions
 - » Types of Questions
5. Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources

Ingredient #4: Asking the Right Kind of Questions

Find out how to ask the types of questions that will bring about life change.
Ecclesiastes 7:25

There are as many possible questions to ask your small group members as there are stars in the sky. Here are some guidelines to help you know which questions to ask.

Opening Questions

Use an icebreaker to help the group warm up to each other and get to know one another better. Broach the topic of discussion with a short, creative hook that will get people talking.

Guiding Questions

Even the most well prepared leader will need to spontaneously guide discussion at times. See “Types of Questions” below for examples of questions and the value of each type. If a question falls flat, repeat or rephrase the question. During silences, gauge your group to see if they are thinking and you should allow the silence, or if they’re bored and you need to move on.

Summarizing Answers

Summarizing after a series of questions allows the leader to encourage members’ contributions while maintaining biblical integrity and direction. This is especially important for seekers or new believers.

Applying to Life

The leader can help members apply what they have learned in several ways.

1. Ask application questions such as “What difference does this make to me?”
2. Suggest challenges such as “I would like to challenge you to do one outrageous act of kindness this week, and next week we will share how it affected us.”

Reflection

- Which types of questions do you ask the most? What might you need to change about how you ask questions?
- Do you give your group members specific challenges? Why or why not?

Application

Read the article “Types of Questions.” Then, pretend that James 1:2–8 is the passage you are studying this week. Read the passage and develop questions in the following categories:

- Opening: an icebreaker open question
- Guiding: one leading and one limiting question
- Applying: one open question and one wide-open question

When you are finished, gather with a group of people to discuss your questions.

Leader’s Guide

- » How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change
- 4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions**
 - » Types of Questions
5. Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources

Formatted: Bullets and Numbering

Types of Questions

LEADING QUESTIONS

Would you be tempted in this situation?

Do you agree with this?

Value—none. Begs a “yes,” “no,” or one word answer

LIMITING QUESTIONS

What three commands do we find in this passage?

What two things does Paul say we must do?

Value—very little towards discussion. These types of questions indicate that you have a specific answer in mind. They only promote limited discovery.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

What do you think was going through this man’s mind?

When do you think a change took place?

How can we benefit from this lesson?

Value—much towards stimulating discovery and increasing open discussion. These questions allow for multifaceted insight.

WIDE OPEN QUESTIONS

How do *you feel* when this happens to you?

What do *you think* you would do if...?

Value—very much toward open discussion and sharing on a personal level. This type of question is great for application.

Leader’s Guide

» How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change
4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions
» **Types of Questions**
5. Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources

Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Know the rules about good questions.

Proverbs 8:12

Research tells us that people remember far more of what they say than what they hear, and far more of what they discover for themselves than what they are spoon-fed. Hence, a question that sparks discovery and gets people to say out loud what they know is an essential tool in teaching.

Questions keep you in touch with the needs of people. They give people the opportunity to discuss how something makes them feel, so you can find out where they're hurting and what their issues are.

Do's and Don'ts of Good Questions

Use the following guidelines to further help you as you develop quality questions:

1. Look for vagueness. If the question is unclear, people won't understand it.
2. Keep it simple—don't ask multiple, technical, complicated questions.
3. Don't be insulting.
4. Don't assume.
 - Don't assume everyone is a Christian.
 - Don't assume everyone came from a wonderful family.
5. Avoid words such as *best*, *worst*, *biggest*, and *most*. It's much easier to answer a broader question such as "Can you think of a time...?" than "Tell me about the best experience..."
6. Keep in mind the power of a "feeling" question.
7. At the end of each study ask, "What went well today? How could we improve?" Ask these questions immediately and during the week after people have had time to think about it. The best way to find out what your group members think about the group is to ask.

Discussion

- Are you guilty of any of the "don'ts" above? Which ones? How can you remember to avoid them in the future?
- With a group of people, look back at the questions you came up with from James 1:2–8. In light of the guidelines you just read, do you need to change any of your questions? If so, take the time to make the necessary changes.
- Do you ask for feedback from your group members? Why or why not? Write down one specific way you will ask for feedback after your next meeting.
- Of the four ingredients for leading a life-changing meeting, which one is your strongest area? Why? What will you do to improve the weaker areas?
 - ◆ Using icebreakers
 - ◆ Understanding the truth-life continuum
 - ◆ Planning for discussion and life change
 - ◆ Asking the right kind of questions

Leader's Guide

- » How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change
4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions
 - » Types of Questions
5. **Understanding the Power of a Good Question**

Additional Resources

Formatted: Bullets and Numbering

Additional Resources

Books and downloads to help you plan and lead a life-changing meeting

BuildingChurchLeaders.com: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- ☐ www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com
 - “Small Groups” Assessment Pack
 - “Developing Leadership Gifts” Assessment Pack
 - “Shepherding Others” Training Theme and PowerPoint
 - “Healthy Small Groups” Training Theme and PowerPoint
 - “Growing Small Groups” Training Theme and PowerPoint

BuildingSmallGroups.com: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- ☐ www.BuildingSmallGroups.com
 - “Small Groups” Assessment Pack

WillowGroups: Small groups resources site of the Willow Creek Association

- ☐ www.willowcreek.com/smallgroups

201 Great Questions by Jerry Jones (NavPress, 1988; ISBN 978-0891092841)

The Complete Book of Questions by Garry Poole (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310244202)

Getting Together by Em Griffin (InterVarsity, 1983; ISBN 978-0877843900)

How to Ask Great Questions by Karen Lee-Thorp (NavPress, 1998; ISBN 978-1576830789)

How to Lead Small Groups by Neal McBride (NavPress, 1990; ISBN 978-0891093039)

Ice-Breakers and Heart-Warmers by Steve Sheely (Serendipity, 1998; ISBN 978-1883419790)

Leading Life-Changing Small Groups by Bill Donahue (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 978-0310247500)

New Testament Lessonmaker by *The Navigators* (ed.) (NavPress, 1992, ISBN 978-0891096887)

Leader's Guide

» How to Use This Material

Training Materials

1. Using Icebreakers
2. Understanding the Truth-Life Continuum
3. Planning for Discussion and Life Change
4. Asking the Right Kind of Questions
 - » Types of Questions
5. Understanding the Power of a Good Question

Additional Resources