

Practical Ministry Skills:

Ministering to Difficult Group Members

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MINISTERING TO DIFFICULT GROUP MEMBERS

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How to Use This Resource

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

Leading a group seems so honorable, grand, and life-changing . . . until you run into difficult group dynamics. It's amazing how the actions of one person can dramatically alter the group. One person giving a little too much advice, one person talking a little too much, and the whole group is affected. Despite all the work you've put in to create a safe environment, it can all come crashing down when difficult group dynamics reign. And that's exactly why you need to learn how to address the issues.

Discussion Problems

Many of the issues leaders face boil down to discussion problems: talking too much, too little, or about the wrong things can take the conversation in a completely different direction. Use these practical articles to handle specific discussion issues. Work through these problems before they take over your group.

Other Issues

These three articles will help you get a handle on issues outside of discussion. Learn how to handle conflict between group members, deal with group members who aren't as committed as you'd like, and work through high maintenance relationships.

—AMY JACKSON is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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The Blessing of "Problem People"

Why EGR should be considered a dirty word

By Sam O'Neal

Everybody loves acronyms—from TGIF to LOL to BLT and beyond. In the world of small-group ministry, the most common acronym I've come across has to be EGR. As in "extra grace required."

The idea is that most people within a small group are "normal" and able to function well within the life of the group. But then there are other people—EGR people—who behave abnormally, and are even potentially dangerous to the community. Therefore the group can only function well if the normal folks use a little extra grace in order to tolerate the "problem people."

Grace for All

I used to be on board with that kind of thinking. I used to laugh whenever I heard someone say, "Every small group has an EGR person—and if you can't figure out who that person is in your group, it's probably you!" Har har.

But I have repented of that notion in recent years because of an important realization: every small group in the world is made up entirely of imperfect human beings. We are all sinful. We are all emotional. We are all unpredictable and perplexing and just a bit unstable.

In other words, we are all "problem people." We all require enormous amounts of grace.

For that reason, I don't like the idea of giving anyone the power to point a finger at a member of the group and say, "He's the difficult one," or, "She's the EGR." No matter our best intentions, such labels change our perceptions of those individuals. They cease to be an equal member of the group in our eyes—someone to love, serve, and enjoy. Instead they become someone to manage, control, or avoid.

And that's a shame.

Investing in Relationships

Don't get me wrong—there are people who make life difficult within a small group. Sometimes these are individuals with legitimate personality disorders or mental illnesses that require more professional assistance than a small group can provide. But those situations are rare.

What is much more common is for regular people to demonstrate habits or patterns of behavior that range from mildly annoying to potentially destructive. For example, they talk too much, they don't talk enough, they want too much control, they offer too much advice, and so forth.

Yes, these tendencies can be problematic and should not be ignored. But the answer is not to isolate the individuals who display those tendencies and attempt to "grin and bear" their presence in a group. Rather, the best solution is to help them become fully integrated into the life of the community.

The good news is that doing so almost always results in a stronger community. When we invest in relationships with "problem people"—when we love our neighbors as ourselves, in other words—we give them a chance to grow beyond their problematic behavior. And hopefully we motivate them to offer the same chance to us when our behavior gets a little troublesome.

I like the way Les Parrott expresses this in his article "Coping with People Who Beef, Bite, and Bellyache": "The effort you exert to improve a difficult relationship is almost always rewarded with new vitality for you and your group."

Use the wisdom in this resource to guide you in loving your group members, and keep in mind that we all have problems.

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—SAM O'NEAL is author of [Field Guide for Small Group Leaders](#) and an advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What is your general attitude toward "problem people" in your group?
2. When has God taught you something about yourself—good or bad—through your interactions with a "problem person"?
3. Who in your group needs you to invest in them rather than see them as a problem? How will you do that?

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When Someone Hijacks Your Group

Four common hijackers and ways to respond

By Margaret Feinberg

Have you ever led a small-group meeting that got out of control? Your material was received well, group members were engaged, and then one person started dominating the group. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn't stop this person from controlling the group. Before you knew it, your small group had been hijacked. Small-group hijackers can do a great deal of harm. Here are four different hijacker personalities and how to deal with each one:

The Talking Hijacker

This is the person who answers every question before anyone else can respond. While most of the participants are still pondering the question, the talking hijacker is spurting out a response. Though you may be grateful for the liveliness and contributions, the talking hijacker leaves the group with a sense that no one else has a chance to respond. Instead of drawing other people out, the talking hijacker makes people want to withdraw. What needs to be said after it feels like everything has already been said?

Taking Control from the Talking Hijacker

First, try to pull to the person aside one-on-one. Thank the person for his or her gracious contributions, but be honest about the need for others to contribute. Encourage the person only to respond to every other or every third question and keep responses short. Or, encourage the person to allow two or three other people to share before sharing. You may even want to solicit the talking hijacker's help in getting other people to talk in the group by asking questions, but be careful because this can backfire.

If the talking hijackers still can't help themselves, you may need to highly structure your discussion time for a while. Set up this ground rule for the next lesson: you'll be calling on specific people to respond to questions. This will encourage the quieter person while deterring the talkative one. If you still can't resolve the issue, another creative idea is to cut out small squares of paper. If you have ten questions you want to discuss and five people in your small group, cut out 15 squares so every group member receives 3. Each time a member speaks they are required to turn in one piece of paper. When they are out of squares, they're no longer allowed to speak until everybody else uses up theirs. You might also require people to raise a hand to be called on so it becomes physically apparent to the talking hijacker just how much they're talking.

The Emotional Hijacker

This small-group member shows up every week with an emotional crisis. Before you know it, the majority of the meeting is spent trying to unravel the problem and soothe the person's emotional needs. Instead of focusing on Scripture or prayer, the majority of time and energy is spent on the Emotional Hijacker.

Taking Control from the Emotional Hijacker

One way to deal with an Emotional Hijacker is to take the person out to coffee or lunch. Once this person has space to share everything going on in life, he or she may not need as much of the small group's time to share. Spending more one-on-one time may also allow you to better understand the person's needs. Depending on the situation, you may be able to suggest a spiritual mentor or Christian counselor. At the next gathering, if the person tries to hijack the group with another crisis, inform the small group that the purpose of the meeting needs to focus on the study at hand and prayer requests will be taken at the end of the meeting. This will allow you to get through the material and still allow the person to share within a more limited time constraint.

The Leader Hijacker

This hijacker is like a back-seat driver that gives you constant directions on how to best lead the group. The Leader Hijacker assumes he or she has the best approach to leading and frequently mentions past leadership positions. The other members don't know who to listen to: you or the hijacker.

Taking Control from the Leader Hijacker

Talking directly with the Leader Hijacker will take courage, but it's the quickest way to a result. Sift through his or her comments to see if you can glean anything helpful. Sometimes there will be good suggestions that

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can benefit the group. If so, mention these helpful suggestions in your conversation, which will keep the atmosphere positive. Tell how you appreciate his or her willingness to share leadership skills and then politely ask the Leader Hijacker to stop doing so at the small-group meetings. Let the Leader Hijacker know that sharing these things during the meeting promotes disunity in the group. Affirm the hijacker by asking for input (at a one-on-one meeting) when you feel you need it, and by offering to listen to suggestions outside of meetings. At the same time, confirm that you are leading in a way that suits your personality and leadership style, noting that it may be different from the hijacker's. If the hijacker makes another comment in a group meeting, respond by saying: "Let's talk about that suggestion outside of the group meeting."

The Late Hijacker

Without fail, this person walks into the small-group meeting late. You've spent 20 minutes building momentum toward a specific point, and right before you ask the most important question the Late Hijacker bursts in. The entrance disrupts the group, and you can't get the group's attention again. The momentum and focus are lost.

Taking Control from the Late Hijacker

Approach the Late Hijacker privately and encourage this person to make a better effort to be on time. Explain how it's hard to get the group refocused once everybody is distracted. If the person can't get there any earlier, encourage them to enter more quietly and sensitively. If the mood seems somber, wait a few minutes before entering so distraction won't be an issue. If the Late Hijacker doesn't stop, you may want to consider encouraging the person to find another small group that fits in his or her schedule better.

—MARGARET FEINBERG has written several books and accompanying DVD studies including [The Organic God](#), [The Sacred Echo](#), [Scouting the Divine](#), and [Pursuing God's Love](#). For more on Margaret, visit her website: www.margaretfleinberg.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you encountered these hijackers? What, if anything, did you do?
2. Do you have any of these hijackers in your current group? If so, create a plan for taking control from them.
3. Who can you go to for support in this matter? A coach? A director? Another leader?

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When Someone Kills Discussion

When someone talks too much, too little, gives advice, or has a misbehaving child

By Sam O'Neal

When Someone Dominates the Group

Jim is a talker. He enjoys expressing his reactions and opinions on different topics—whether others are interested in hearing them or not. This is true when his group engages in discussion, but also when they have social time and when they pray (Jim has a lot of prayer requests).

A few members of the group have become irritated by Jim's constant talking, but he is unaware of their feelings. So, what should happen next?

A Note of Caution

First, please be aware that some people naturally talk more than others. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. For example, people with an auditory learning style usually process information by speaking out loud. It's just part of how they learn and how they remember facts or ideas they consider important. The same is often true of extroverts and social learners.

So, before you label a group member as someone who "talks too much," take a step back and try to look objectively at the situation. Are they really being disruptive and controlling, or do they just talk more than you would?

Practical Steps

In Jim's case, it seems like he does contribute a bit more than is appropriate. As a group leader, here are a few steps you could take to help the situation:

- **Be assertive.** Before a discussion, remind the group that everyone benefits when more people are able to participate.
- **Manage eye contact.** The more eye contact Jim receives, the more he will feel invited to talk. For that reason, consider sitting next to him during a discussion.
- **Manage silence.** It's possible that Jim is uncomfortable with silence, which results in him jumping into the discussion when others hesitate. To help this, practice regular "moments of silence" with your group. Give everyone permission to think silently for as long as they need before joining in.
- **Have a conversation.** If nothing affects Jim's level of participation, have a private conversation with him. Be humble, but tell him honestly what you've observed. Then ask for his ideas on how to make the situation better.

When Someone Offers a Lot of Advice

Laura has been part of a small group for several years, and she is known as someone with a kind heart who genuinely cares for the other participants. She is also known as someone who gives a lot of advice. During social time, during discussions, and even as people share prayer requests, she is quick to offer possible solutions to just about any problem she hears about.

Most people listen politely to what Laura has to say, but don't respond. A few group members have also approached the leader and expressed their annoyance at Laura's habit. So, what should happen next?

Address the Group

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It's helpful at first to remind everyone that offering advice during a group meeting is not beneficial—especially during the prayer time. Explain that the group needs to be a safe place in order for people to feel comfortable sharing their personal stories and struggles. And advice does not generate safety.

If your group has a covenant, use it as the basis of this reminder. (And if you don't have a covenant, this would be a good time to write one together.)

Address Laura

If this general reminder does not curb Laura's enthusiasm for solving other people's problems, you will need to speak with her in private. The difficulty in this situation is that Laura's motives are good (she just wants to help), and she probably doesn't realize how much advice she is giving.

Therefore, I recommend you talk with her within 24 hours after a group meeting where she again offers advice multiple times. And use specific examples in the process of explaining your concerns. You need to be humble during this conversation—you are not a magistrate pronouncing judgment—but you also need to be firm in your conviction that small group should be an advice-free zone.

When Someone Rarely Participates

Leon has been a member of his small group for more than a year now, but the other group members still don't know much about him. He's punctual and polite, but he's also quiet to the extreme. He answers questions when asked directly, but he volunteers very little information of his own accord.

The group leader feels pressured to draw Leon out and help him become a more full-bodied member of the community. So what should happen next?

A Note of Caution

This is another situation where you as the group leader need to take a step back and try to look at things objectively. Because the fact that Leon talks less than everyone else during discussions is not necessarily an indication that anything is wrong. Some people process information and ideas more slowly than others, for example, and a small-group discussion is usually a fast-paced environment. In addition, Leon may be a solitary learner—preferring to engage with concepts and ideas by listening to a conversation rather than joining in.

You should raise a red flag if it becomes apparent that Leon is not becoming part of the group—if he operates as an outsider, in other words. And that seems to be the case in this situation given that the other group members know very little about him.

Practical Steps

Here are a few options you can use to draw someone more deeply into the life of the group:

- **Use eye contact.** Consider sitting directly across from Leon during group discussions, since people often respond to eye contact as an invitation to talk.
- **Praise, praise, praise.** When Leon does participate in the life of the group, give him some positive reinforcement. "I really appreciate you praying tonight, Leon. It was great to hear from you."
- **Arrange a private meeting.** Try spending time with Leon outside of the group, just the two of you. He may prefer face-to-face interaction over more social environments. It's also appropriate to ask Leon if anything is making him feel uncomfortable during group meetings.

When Children Behave Badly

Sally and Jorge are model small-group members. Unfortunately, their son Max is a bit of a terror. He often leaves the children's playroom to ask his parents for a snack or a toy, interrupting the adults during discussion and prayer. Worse, he is a behavior problem for the babysitter arranged by the group, and he even bullies the other children at times.

Several people in the group confess privately to being "Maxed out," but Sally and Jorge appear ignorant of the problem. So what should happen next?

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Speak Privately

This is a situation where you would not want to make a general announcement about how children should behave during group meetings. Such a declaration would probably go over Sally and Jorge's heads, since they have been oblivious to the problem this long. And if it didn't, they would feel publically chastised as parents.

So speak with them privately. Show humility and respect during this conversation, but again be honest about what you have observed. Also, be specific about the more troubling examples of Max's misbehavior. You may want to include a written report from the babysitter.

Be a Family

It's possible that Sally and Jorge may react with shame and anger no matter how well you manage this conversation—their child is involved, after all.

But if that is not the case and they are able to remain involved in the community, then you and the other group members need to reach out to Max. Talk with him. Play games with him before and after group meetings (even during meetings, when appropriate). Build a relationship with him—really, with *all* of the children in the group.

This will help you build the authority to correct or re-direct Max on minor issues. And when Sally and Jorge see that you genuinely care for their son, they will be more receptive to listening to you concerning any major issues that require their attention.

—SAM O'NEAL is author of [Field Guide for Small Group Leaders](#) and an advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you encountered these issues in a group? When have you seen them handled well?
2. Which of these issues are most challenging to you? Why?
3. Which of these issues are you currently facing in your group? How will you handle the problem?

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When Someone Gets the Group Off Topic

Seven tips to stay on track

By Reid Smith

Group discussions naturally meander. You don't want to be too rigid, but you also don't want to have a meeting full of rabbit trails. Try to keep the balance between tight focus and some wiggle room. A helpful analogy is sailing. A sailor doesn't hold on tightly to the rope, locking the sail in a single position. This actually gets the boat to the destination slower than if one held on loosely to the rope, letting the sail fully catch the shifting winds. Each small group moves at its own pace and rhythm based on its unique chemistry. Discern what your group's pace and rhythm are and direct the study and discussion accordingly.

Here are some pointers that can help groups that have trouble staying on topic.

1. **Prepare realistically for the meeting.** Begin with the assumption that you'll be able to cover only half of the questions presented in any prepared study guide. Ask yourself: "Which half of these questions will work best for my group?" Then cover those questions, and if time allows you can cover the remaining questions. This allows you more focus for what you want to cover and means you'll prepare an appropriate number of questions for the discussion time.
2. **Outline what you want to do at the beginning of the meeting.** Avoid sharing this as if it's an agenda. Rather, chart the course and explain to the group why it would be good for you to cover the questions prepared for the gathering. Set a goal for the group. For example, you could encourage them by saying, "In this meeting, let's explore . . ." or "What I hope you'll walk away with by the end of our meeting is . . ." With goals in mind, your group knows they're travelling toward a destination.
3. **Try to discern a pattern.** Does the group tend to get off topic at generally the same time at each meeting? Does something trigger this tendency to get off topic? It could be an individual or a way questions are phrased. Pay attention to see if there is a pattern to when and why the group gets off track. How might you avoid this pattern? Do you need to talk one-on-one with the group member who regularly brings up tangents?
4. **Ask the group if they're happy with the study you're doing.** When a group continually gets off topic it might be a signal that it's time to abandon the study you're doing. That's completely acceptable. People might be bored or disinterested in it. Discuss this together. Check in from time to time with your group and ask if the study is working for them.
5. **Try to link "wandering talk" back to the topic at hand.** Look for opportunities to jump in, graciously segue, and take hold of the steering wheel again. You don't have to bring an abrupt halt to someone's aimless chatter—look for the right moment when you can gracefully harness it and relate it back to the study.
6. **Invite your coach to attend a meeting to see if he or she can give you insight.** Having another perspective can be critical in these situations. Your coach may notice a pattern that you are oblivious to or suggest something new for you to try. Coaches are there to help you; tap into their wisdom.
7. **Ask trusted group participants to help keep the study on track.** Sometimes it can be beneficial to enlist the help of other group members. Ask one or two participants to pay attention to when you get off track and say something like "What was the question again?" Not only will you have help, but also these helpers will feel more ownership of the group.

—REID SMITH is the Community Life Pastor of Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, and the founder of the [2orMore](#) small-group leadership training and resource ministry; used with permission.

Discuss

1. When has your group struggled with tangents? Is there a pattern?
2. Is there a specific person in your group who normally leads the off-topic conversations? If so, how might you speak to him or her about the issue?
3. What one or two things can you implement at your next meeting to help minimize off-topic conversation?

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When Someone Isn't Listening Well

Teach your group members how to listen well by modeling

By Diana Bennett

Unfortunately, most of us do not listen well. Instead of listening attentively, we wait for that split second of pause to jump in with our own stories and comments, our eyes wander the room, and our ears focus on other sounds. Attentive listening is a discipline that needs to be developed. It doesn't just happen.

Attentive listening comes as a response to prayer—praying for the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our hearts while attentively listening to a person verbalize emotions, thoughts, experiences, and doubts. What is the Holy Spirit prompting you to hear? Where do you see God moving in this person's life? Where are you noticing spiritual growth and discernment that was not evident earlier? This is not the time to compare stories, give advice, or reprimand a person's actions. Listening is a time to appreciate and discern what is happening in another's life.

How Well Are You Modeling?

Developing listening skills should be part of every healthy small group. After all, if we cannot listen well to one another, how do we listen well to the voice of God? As small-group leaders, we need to model listening to our group members. How true are these statements of you?

- I always have eye contact with the person who is talking.
- I never shuffle papers or look around the room while another is talking.
- I don't look at my watch when someone begins to share.
- My posture is that of receiving—my arms are not crossed, I'm leaning slightly forward, and my body appears "open" to listen.
- I don't add to or embellish what someone else has tried to share with what I think they mean, possibly adding my own examples.

If we as leaders can model attentive listening, our group will begin to respond. Attentive and prayerful listening involves inviting the Holy Spirit into the process; it is counter-cultural to our normative practices. It is contemplative, careful, sensitive listening. This kind of listening develops trust, freedom, and openness, and it touches souls at the deepest level. Then we will "love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

Talk About Expectations

In beginning a new small group, or at times when you're revisiting your covenant, an emphasis on the importance of attentive listening is critical. Remind group members that everyone has a chance to speak while others give the gift of attentive listening. When people feel they have been carefully and attentively heard, group bonding increases, friendship grows stronger, and prayer becomes increasingly powerful. This type of listening develops over time and can become a way of life. We hear God speak and see him work individually and corporately. Nothing is taken for granted. We "spur one another on." Some reminders for your group will be helpful:

- Each group member is encouraged to participate; no one dominates.
- One person speaks at a time; the rest listen and discern.
- No one is called upon; discussion does not go "around the circle."
- Everyone's contribution is important.
- Advice and criticism are not acceptable.
- There will be times when others can ask clarifying questions or speak encouragement into other group members.

Use Teachable Moments

As small-group leaders, we can help develop the discipline of attentive listening. Whether you're studying the Bible or simply sharing life stories, your discussion will benefit from attentive listening. Pay special attention

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to application questions that introduce the opportunity for deeper listening. Truly listen to the answers given. Consider the following tips:

- Watch your body language. You communicate a lot without even speaking. Keep eye contact and lean slightly forward. Make sure your arms aren't crossed, giving the impression that you're closed off.
- How do you respond when someone speaks more frequently than you wish? Prefacing a question with "let's hear from someone who has not shared" helps curtail the constant-comment person from dominating.
- Listen "between the lines." Watch the speaker's body language. Ask clarifying questions and encourage through comments such as "this must be a difficult time for you" or "we celebrate what God is doing in your life." The goal of listening is to understand what the person is trying to say at the heart level.
- If judging, criticizing, and giving advice surfaces from the group, immediately halt the conversation. For example, a leader can say, "Thanks for your interest in helping out, but we're giving advice more than listening at the moment." It takes boldness laced with gentleness! But judging, criticizing, and giving advice cannot continue if you want to listen well. If a group member is repeatedly engaging in this behavior, find a time to talk privately.
- Leader, you don't have to comment on everything that has been said. Choose facial expressions that show appreciation and affirmation. Nod along to show you agree and understand. Allow occasional times of silence before questions or comments. Silence is needed to reflect on what has been said.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes this in his fabulous book *Life Together*:

Listening is one of the most precious gifts we can give to one another. Stop for a moment and recall your own feelings when you last felt truly listened to. . . . Listening says to the other person: "I care for you, I respect your uniqueness. How you feel and what you say matters to me. And in order to make this clear, I'm willing to set aside my own concerns, give you space to share yourself and offer you my focused attention. I want to try to understand the inexhaustible mystery of your inner world.

Everyone yearns to be listened to from a deep caring level. Amazing spiritual growth happens within a listening and discerning small group. Make your group members leave saying, "I feel so validated and encouraged because my friends really listened to me." The discipline will develop over time and flow into the life outside the group, family, culture, and marketplace. It begins with the leader and filters down into the life of the group.

—DIANA BENNETT is the Director of Small Group Ministries at Christ Chapel on Cape Cod, and serves as the Consultant for Small Group Development and Training at www.LeadershipTransformations.org; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How are you doing at modeling good listening to your group?
2. When it comes to listening, have you had a conversation with your group about expectations? If not, why not? If so, has it helped? Is it time for another conversation?
3. How easily do you take advantage of teachable moments? How can you prepare yourself to use teachable moments to show your group members how to be better listeners?

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When Someone Causes Doctrinal Conflict

Five methods for approaching doctrinal strife in your group

By Joel Comiskey

It was Tom who blurted it out: "I believe that Jesus only died for the elect, and that he predestines only elected people to be saved. God will bring to me those he wants me to talk with. So I don't believe in witnessing."

The rest of the group froze in silence. The question on everyone's mind was, *How is our leader going to handle this?*

That's a good question, because doctrinal conflict can and does occur in small-group ministry. Dealing with doctrinal conflict is a complex problem, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Yet when the group leader is armed with various options and responses, the Holy Spirit can more readily remind him or her which option best fits the situation. Below are some possibilities.

The "Can We Talk at Another Time?" Approach

This is often the best approach. Most small-group lessons last 30 to 45 minutes—a time period in which the group can cover only a limited amount of ground. Consequently, one of the chief jobs of the small-group leader is to keep the discussion on track. When a doctrinal issue comes up, the leader can say, "Tom, thanks for sharing your ideas, but this is not the time to debate eternal security and predestination. Let's have that conversation another time."

Remember that group members often feel uncomfortable when wandering down the path of a tangled doctrinal discussion. Granted, there's a time and place for such discussions, but it's rarely in the middle of a small-group gathering. This approach allows you to positively respond to the person with the doctrinal issue, yet firmly state that it's best to discuss the matter outside of the group.

The "I Don't Know" Approach

Here is a blessed phrase: "I don't know, but I will check on it and get back to you." That is a phrase of honor, not disgrace. Small-group leaders are not supposed to be theological experts. They are usually trained in other professions. So when a small-group leader says, "I don't know," he or she is manifesting the humble attitude of a learner.

Pride tempts many group leaders to act like they know the answer to any question. But the results of giving in to such pride can be disastrous. How often have you seen group leaders think they remember a Scripture verse that addresses a theological question, only to spend 5 or 10 fruitless minutes hunting for it? And answers given under pressure usually ring hollow.

The "Brief Answer and Continue" Approach

When a doctrinal issue can be easily explained, and the leader feels the group might also be helped by the answer, he or she can give a brief answer and move on. This is a good approach when the question comes from a sincere member who is known and respected in the group. Note that the leader should be sufficiently confident in the subject matter to give a brief answer. It's often harder to give a concise answer than a long, rambling one.

The "Go with the Flow" Approach

Sometimes it's appropriate to let the group "have at it" regarding a question about doctrine. I remember one meeting in my living room in which first-timer Mary, a nominal Roman Catholic, blurted out her frustration with the Catholic Church. She wanted to discuss what was boiling inside her heart—the doctrinal differences between the Catholic Church and Protestant Christianity.

In this case, Mary sincerely wanted help. I allowed her to share her doubts, and we as a group answered her questions. I chose this option because, first, she was the guest of a faithful member of the group. Second, she

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asked sincere questions that demonstrated a desire to know Christ—not just debate doctrine. Third, the maturity level of the rest of the group was high enough to warrant a free-flowing and respectful exchange with Mary.

We spent most of the lesson discussing her issues, and she came back week after week with more and more of her questions answered. Eventually she started following Christ and was baptized in our church. Sometimes the leader should see a doctrinal discussion as an opportunity to minister to doubting or seeking people.

Experience is the best teacher when determining which approach to take with doctrinal conflicts. Small-group leaders should not be afraid of failure—it will occur. But there's no one who can help make sense of the diverse experiences better than the Holy Spirit.

—JOEL COMISKEY is founder of the [Joel Comiskey Group](#) and author of numerous books, including [The Relational Disciple](#); copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you experienced doctrinal conflict? How was it handled?
2. How do you naturally react to doctrinal conflict? Is it a positive reaction?
3. Which of these strategies are especially helpful?

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When Someone Promotes False Theology

Prevention strategies and tips for addressing heresy in your small group

By Reid Smith

Any group Bible study will reveal that not everyone thinks the same thing about a given passage of Scripture. But how does a small-group leader handle a situation where somebody begins promoting a false theology? Here are some pointers to keep in mind:

- Don't be afraid. Prayerfully commit your group and each study to the Lord.
- Put the good of the whole group on the front-burner and concern about stepping on the toes of the individual in error on the back-burner. That person did not hesitate to bring up his or her point to the group; therefore, you should not hesitate to lovingly address it in the group.
- Sort the essentials from the non-essentials and spend your time and energy on what really matters.
- Remember, there is a difference between somebody saying something that happens to be erroneous (most of the time this is the case) and somebody who is actually *promoting* false theology. If somebody is promoting false theology, address it head-on with truth and grace (Titus 1:9).

Addressing False Theology

These steps will help you approach such a situation in your group:

1. Ask the person to clarify what he or she is really saying. You might even restate what you have heard: "Are you saying that _____? Am I hearing you correctly? Could you explain more?" Adopt an inquisitive posture, be humble, and ask for explanation with scriptural support.
2. If they try to substantiate their position, invite other group members into the conversation by asking them, "What do all of you think about what _____ has said? Does it harmonize with what you know about this topic?" The conversation doesn't have to be confrontational. Simply journey together.
3. Gently but firmly express the truth, and if possible support what you share with a biblical reference. It's vital that you don't let the individual's misunderstanding derail the whole meeting. If he or she wants to pursue the matter further, state that you will be happy to do so after the group.
4. If the person seems persistent in promoting something other than the truth, ask him or her not to do it again. This may be done best in a one-on-one conversation. If the person does not respect your request, contact your coach or pastor for support.

Preventing False Theology

Here are additional tips to help keep your group centered on God's Word and create an environment where biblical community can grow:

1. Clarify from the beginning that your small group holds the Bible as the Word of God. As such, it will be the authoritative source and standard of truth for your Bible study and discussions.
2. Continually bring your discussion back to the person of Jesus Christ by asking, "How does this help us to understand Jesus more, grow closer to him, and live more like him?"
3. Be intentional about drawing each group member into the process of reading and interpreting what the Bible has to say on issues of life. It can only help the group if each person grows in the ability to accurately interpret God's Word.

Because we are all fallible, we need to continually and intentionally commit to God's Word as the source of our knowledge. We also need our fellow journeyers to lovingly confront us when we begin to drift. But neither of those necessary steps will happen unless you as the group leader take the initiative.

—REID SMITH; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. Where is the line between open discussions and allowing a member to lead the group astray?
2. What steps can you take to better prevent group members from promoting false theology?
3. How well are you able to confront in a humble, loving way? If you need some pointers, who can help you?

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When Someone Shows Favoritism

The dangers of differential responding in a small-group setting.

By Brooke B. Collison

In group discussions, some people respond more intently to the statements of one person than they do another. The technical term for this phenomenon is *differential responding*. In particular, differential responding becomes an issue if the difference in response to statements reflects such things as gender or racial bias, perceived status, or personal history.

When people begin to give more attention or importance to one person's statements because of class or other arbitrary designations, they have taken something away from the rest of the group and have been unfair to those who are ignored.

Defining the Term

The group I am part of recently had a discussion about the way women's statements are not valued. One woman in the group (who has been on numerous governing boards and committees) described how she has frequently made statements that were ignored by others, only to have a male make a similar statement later and have it be valued. Other women in the group validated her observation with their own similar experiences.

Similarly, my spouse and I have had frequent discussions about how my statements are valued by others more quickly than hers—especially when my degree, title, or position is made public. We have had some laughs about this, remembering a time when we were invited to a gathering where we knew no one present. We were both being ignored until someone who knew me entered and addressed me with the "Dr." in front of my name. Suddenly several people turned to us, wanting to engage us (me) in conversation. Needless to say, we were less interested in engaging them at that point than we might have been earlier in the evening.

It should be noted that differential responding is not the same as giving weight to a person's remarks because they have legitimate expertise. I will listen to my financial advisor's opinion about retirement funds more intently than my grocer, for example.

Taking Action

Differential responding often relates to a shared personal history, especially if the people in a group are couples or if two members have a relationship outside the group—employees, a history of committee work together, or similar experience. If the leader observes one person ignoring the statements of a partner, or if one person usually criticizes statements made by the same individual, it is an issue the leader needs to address—if the group doesn't deal with it first. The response pattern may have developed over many years of being together. Small groups in churches are not marriage therapy groups; however, they are appropriate places for couples or coworkers to examine their communication patterns.

Addressing differential responding is most easily handled with a leader observation: "I notice that when women in the group make statements, you frequently [describe the behavior: laugh, don't respond, disagree, or the like]." It is more delicate for the leader when the issue is wrapped in personal history. "I notice that when your spouse [friend, coworker, or the like] makes a statement, you often close your eyes and make a face. What does that mean?" Be prepared for an intense discussion when this kind of observation is made.

In addition, this discussion may provoke some generalizations such as, "Men never..." or "Women always...." On the bright side, such discussions may be an opportunity for the group to challenge these generalizations.

—BROOKE B. COLLISON; excerpted from [Know and Be Known](#) (Alban Institute, 2007). Used with permission.

Discuss:

1. Describe a time when you felt ignored or unheard. What was the experience like?
2. What is the difference between showing favoritism toward someone with a particular degree and giving weight to a group member with legitimate expertise?

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3. Is it appropriate to address with the whole group favoritism that seems to stem from personal history? Why or why not?

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Coping with People Who Beef, Bite, and Bellyache

How to handle difficult relationships in your small group

By Les Parrott

As kids, it never occurred to us to "work" on any of our relationships. They just happened. And if for any reason they didn't, we jumped ship. No fuss, no muss.

But somewhere along the line, each of us entered the fray of mature relationships—and things got dicey. We learned that some people were more difficult, if not impossible, to get along with. We learned that trusted friends could betray us. Authority figures we admired could snub us. A colleague's constant criticism could hurt us. And even family members with important information could leave us out of the loop. But we also learned that, unless we wanted to be hermits, we couldn't abandon every relationship that hits a snag. That's the rub with difficult people—we sink or swim together, especially in a small group.

A pioneering band of researchers has studied the age-old mystery of what makes people happy, in a general sense. Their answer is not what you might expect. What comes up consistently at the top of the charts is not success, good looks, or any of those enviable assets. The clear winner is relationships. Close ones—the kind of relationships that small groups engender.

But such research raises an interesting question: If relationships make us so happy, why do so many of them make life so difficult? And more importantly, what can we do to keep our cool, stand our ground, and reach positive solutions when we find ourselves in a group with high-maintenance relationships?

Defining the Issue

About 40 years ago, William Schutz was requested by the U. S. Navy to construct an instrument that would help them assemble compatible submarine crews—groups of men who could live together, elbow to elbow, for extended periods of time with minimum conflict. Schutz determined that compatible behavior was determined primarily by "natural fit." In other words, people who get along well with each other do so without much effort. Their relationship doesn't require much work; you could say it's low maintenance.

Hopefully, you have a few low-maintenance members in your small group—people with whom you naturally fit. Sure, you may hit temporary turbulence together from time to time, but it's periodic and the relationship stays on course. If you are like most people, however, you also have some small-group relationships that aren't so easy. These are the impossible people who beef, bite, and bellyache. They give you the cold shoulder, require special attention, play the victim, dominate the group, or trample other people's feelings.

So you may wonder, *Are we simply left to wallow in the misery they create?* Hardly.

After combing libraries, listening to small-group leaders, and surveying dozens of small-group members, I have concluded that it is possible to make most high-maintenance relationships much better—in many cases, better than you could even imagine. Scripture not only says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18), it also promises that when we work at turning from our self-centered ways to building up our relationships, we "flourish like a palm tree . . . like a cedar of Lebanon" (Psalm 92:12). The effort you exert to improve a difficult relationship is almost always rewarded with new vitality for you and your group.

Maybe you are free from passive-aggressive group members, or members that are highly critical or controlling. Or maybe you've never encountered any other descriptions that fall under "difficult people" in a small group. If so, read no further. Consider yourself lucky, and extremely rare. But if you are like most group leaders dealing with difficult people, I offer the following key suggestions.

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Don't Let a Difficult Person Determine Your Mood

When Thomas Jefferson included "the pursuit of happiness" among our inalienable rights, he pinpointed an idea that is important for all of us wanting to live with inward joy: people will interfere with our inalienable right to be happy if we allow them to.

In a small group I participated in some time ago, my friend who was leading gave some materials to a very sullen group member. As he did so, he politely thanked the man with a sour disposition for being there. The man, however, did not even acknowledge it. Afterward, I asked my friend about it. "A sullen fellow, isn't he?" I commented as we walked away. "Oh, he's that way every time we meet," shrugged my friend. "Then why do you continue being so polite to him?" I asked. My friend replied, "Why should I let him determine how I'm going to act?"

What an insight! But what really impressed me was that my friend was practicing it. To know that others don't control our moods is one thing, but to actually live this out is quite another. So practice this lesson every chance you get with a high-maintenance person in your group. If you do, it will soon become a habit.

Set Your Boundaries

As a kid, I was the ball boy for a soccer team at the college where my father worked. I ran back and forth along the sideline ready to retrieve a ball that went out of bounds. Of course, when it did, the action on the field stopped. The same is true when you learn to set boundaries with difficult people. Since your small group has no referees to blow the whistle or coaches to call a time-out, you become responsible for saying "foul" or "that was out of bounds." You alone manage the game.

So set some boundaries with the high-maintenance people in your group. Set limits on what is acceptable behavior. Decide what you want, be specific, and let the person know the rules. When he or she steps out of bounds, blow the whistle and call a time out before you resume play as a group together (or if more appropriate, after the group dismisses for the evening).

Guard Against Infection

Warning: the negativism virus is highly contagious. Just like the flu, negativism can unwittingly be transmitted throughout a small group. Think of it this way: When someone honks insistently on the highway, does your ire rise to match theirs? No word has been spoken, but if you are like most people, you catch the driver's negativity.

The point is that when we are around a negative person, we become negative, too. We cut down other people's ideas and make cynical statements. Once infected, it becomes a way of relating. It becomes our membership dues to acceptance.

So the goal for you as a small-group leader is to be objective and observe the person's negative feelings without getting infected by them. Paul gives us the best protection against negativism when he says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

Recognize the Chemistry Between You

Everybody is somebody's impossible person some of the time. But rarely is somebody everyone's impossible person all of the time. Oh, there are those few annoying exceptions that make it their mission to complicate everyone's existence—you can usually detect them when the mere mention of their presence elicits a resounding "Oh no!" from a group of people. But thankfully, they are rare.

That's why a good rule of thumb is to remember that the difficulty you experience with most impossible people is in your relationship, not in the person. Someone you like very much might get along just fine with someone else in the group that you can barely bare. Impossibility, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

—LES PARROTT, PH.D., is founder of www.RealRelationships.com and the Center for Relationship Development; copyright 2008 by Christianity Today.

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Discuss:

1. Do you allow the behavior and attitudes of others to influence or affect your behavior and attitude? What steps can you take to avoid that in the future?
2. What boundaries have you set for your group? What do you do when a person has gone "out of bounds"?
3. Who in your group gets along with the difficult person/people? How can you enlist his or her help in caring for them?

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Why Bother?!

What to do when group members aren't as committed as you'd like

By Allen White

Few things are more frustrating for a small-group leader than spending time preparing your home, your lesson, and yourself—only to face a half-empty living room. What's worse is when group members do show up, but they have very little to say. Leaders can't help but wonder, *Why am I even doing this?*

But before you plunge headlong into the woes of group life, let's consider what might be going on.

Examine the Expectations

It's unrealistic for a group leader to expect 100 percent attendance, except for dire emergencies, from every person in the group. It's also unfair for group members to feel like they can skip gatherings without notification any time they choose. There needs to be a balance.

Participation should be a high value for your group, but that only works if it is a high value for everyone in the group. And as your group discusses the commitment they are willing to make, agreement is essential. The end result of this discussion should be a statement like: "Our group values participation and encourages every member to participate in every meeting. If a group member cannot attend, he or she should contact the small-group leader before the meeting." (*Caution:* don't impose this exact statement on your group. You need to decide together.)

The next question is: How do you follow up with group members who are absent? Because group members will miss meetings, and sometimes they will even forget to call. Rather than focusing on rule-breaking, your concern should be about their well-being. A simple phone call is all it takes. "Hey, we missed you last week. Is everything okay?" If the member was absent because of an illness or an emergency, this could be an opportunity for the group to help—and it's definitely an opportunity to pray.

Examine the Size of Your Group

Participation is more than just showing up. In a healthy environment, most group members will feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and their lives with each other. But when group numbers go up, participation will go down. A few outspoken folks will dominate the discussion. The quieter folks will shy away.

If your group is larger than eight people, it's important to subgroup during the discussion in order to give everyone an opportunity to participate. Have group members break up into smaller groups of three or four. As your group continues to grow, you may need to use other available rooms to accommodate these subgroups.

It's important to look around the room during a discussion. Who is sharing? Who is not? If several members have less to say, then subgrouping can certainly help.

Commit to Every Scheduled Group Meeting

Most group leaders prefer a full house to experience the lesson, activities, and snacks they have prepared. The question is: What does God have in mind? Sometimes what can be accomplished with 2 or 3 could never happen with 14 people in the room.

One group leader in Texas tells the story of a night she just knew her group wasn't going to fly. Throughout the day, one couple after another called to cancel. Then to top it off, her husband called to say he had to work late. That was it—a 100 percent cancellation. The leader kicked back, ready for a quiet evening at home. Right at 7 P.M., however, the doorbell rang. She got up and discovered a long lost couple from their group standing at the door. She hadn't even thought to call them, since they hadn't attended a group meeting in so long. Thankfully, she invited them in. Their group of three didn't unpack the lesson for the night, but in the course of the conversation, the man asked how he could be saved. The leader led him to Christ that night right on the spot! The meeting that had seemed doomed all day was just the situation God needed to orchestrate this man's salvation. So remember: every group meeting is meaningful.

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Remember also that small groups are like living things in that they are constantly changing. When you watch the growth of a garden, you can see different stages and seasons. There are new shoots, spurts of growth, and times of correction and pruning.

In a similar way, your small group will change over time. People will come; others will go for various reasons. This is normal. If they all go, that would be the time to worry. Until then, trust that God has given those he intends for you to help.

—ALLEN WHITE blogs at AllenWhite.org; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. Examine your commitment expectations for your group members. Are they realistic? Why or why not?
2. How does the size of your group contribute to your group's dynamics and amount of sharing?
3. How do you respond when your group members cancel? Is this a helpful and healthy response? Why or why not?

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Restoring Group Harmony

What to do when people are in serious conflict

By Les Parrott

I was leading a small group some time ago when one of the members spoke out with an uncharacteristic edge in her voice: "I thought this group agreed to keep things just between us! Didn't we promise not to share anything without permission?"

"That's right, Sara," I managed to say. "What's wrong? Was your confidence betrayed?"

"You could say that," she barked. Apparently, Sara felt one of the other group members had revealed something she said in the group to one of her family members. And that was enough for Sara to call it quits—or at least threaten to.

"Why would I stay in a group where someone blabs all your secrets?"

It was a justifiable question. But was it grounded in reality? As the story became clearer, we realized that Julie, the group member in question, felt she'd done nothing of the sort. She calmly defended herself, explaining that Sara's family member tried to get some information from her, but she didn't say a word.

One thing was certain: we had a relational rift in our midst, and nobody was comfortable.

It Will Happen to You

It's almost inevitable. If you're involved in small-group ministry long enough, you'll eventually find yourself in a situation where you're desperate to mend a few fences and restore a broken relationship.

Why did it break? It could be due to a misunderstanding, an intentional slight, or an outright betrayal. That's when things get dicey. Bitterness enters the group, and suddenly you have two group members at an impasse. And the moment you as a group leader realize you have two members who genuinely dislike each other, you'll be desperate for some direction. So how can a group leader help repair a relational rift?

Count the Cost

This may sound strange at first, but you need to determine whether the ruptured relationship is worth repairing. Now, I can almost hear you gearing up to preach a sermon at me on reconciliation. Okay. I get that. We need to do everything we can to build strong and healthy relationships within our church family. I'm all for that. In fact, I've devoted most of my professional life to trying to make that happen.

But before we jump in with both feet to save the day for two disjointed people in a small group, we need to count the cost. Ask yourself if this effort will be a healthy and growth-promoting process for the rest of the group members. If not, consider doing this work outside of the group or even referring them to a more qualified staff person.

Focus on Forgiveness

When someone slights you, offends you, or deeply hurts you, the urge to respond in kind is natural: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The problem with this urge is that we don't know when to stop. If we lose an eye, we want more than an eye in return. We don't want to balance the scales; we want them tipped in our favor. And once we feel the compensation is satisfactory, the other person takes his turn at punishing us again. The cycle repeats itself over and over.

Forgiveness puts an end to all that. Our primal urge to "balance the score" comes to a screeching halt when we set our pride aside and begin to forgive. It's for our own advantage, too. Because getting even takes its toll not only on the offender, but also on the one seeking revenge. When Jesus tells us to "turn the other cheek" or "go

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the extra mile," he is not telling us to give our enemy some advantage over us. He is not telling us to be cowards. Cheek-turning is for our own protection. Once you free yourself from a desire to hurt back, you put an end to your vindictive spirit and save yourself from further harm.

But let's get real. How do we help this happen when two group members are at odds? How do we help them forgive? It begins by gently asking if either one is willing to set their pride aside and try their best to see the situation from the other person's perspective. If neither party is willing to take this crucial step, press the pause button. They need more time to cool down. The problems that plague relationships are rarely 100 percent one person's fault. In time, one of them is likely to set their foolish pride aside. And that's when an apology and genuine forgiveness can occur.

This is critical because, in truth, the proverbial scales can never be balanced. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil," says the apostle Paul, instead "live at peace." That's the result of forgiveness: peace. And it sets the tone for the next step in repairing the relationship.

Rebuild Respect

Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero, who wrote one of the best treatises ever on relationships, insisted that what brings two people together in genuine friendship is "a mutual belief in each other's goodness." This virtue as a precondition for true relationship can be difficult to cultivate when a person feel betrayed, but it is essential. "Remove respect from friendship," said Cicero, "and you have taken away the most splendid ornament it possesses."

Keep this in mind: it's a process. Rebuilding respect doesn't happen in a group session or two. In the relational turmoil, each person's respect for the other has been battered and bruised. So it will take some nurturing.

You can do just that by helping both of them note the others' most admirable qualities. You can even make it a group exercise by having everyone note what traits each person has that inspire them to become a better person. This kind of thing helps those in conflict to think about rebuilding respect for each other without having to shine a spot light on it.

In the end, it all comes down to one person offering another a sincere apology for not being the kind of person they wanted to be. As they confess this simple fact to the other person, and perhaps to the entire group, you can be assured that healing is happening. Harmony is being restored.

—LES PARROTT, PH.D., is founder of www.RealRelationships.com and the Center for Relationship Development; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. When have you experienced conflict between group members? How was it handled?
2. When is it appropriate to work on conflict within the group, and when should it be done outside the meeting?
3. What can the rest of your group members do to help create a safe space as the conflicting members work through forgiveness and rebuild respect and trust?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help small-group leaders minister to difficult group members

SmallGroups.com. We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Are You Engaging Everyone?](#) (Assessment Pack)
- [Are You In an Unhealthy Relationship?](#) (Interactive Assessment)
- [Avoiding Burnout](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Empowering Group Members](#) (Training Theme)
- [Healthy Boundaries for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Is Your Group a Hospitable Place?](#) (Interactive Assessment)
- [Maximizing Multi-Stage Groups](#) (Training Theme)
- [Multigenerational Small Groups](#) (Training Theme)

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

LeadershipJournal.net. A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

GiftedforLeadership.com. A website ministering to women leaders.

[Field Guide for Small Group Leaders](#) by Sam O'Neal. Tried and true tips for leading excellent meetings (IVP Connect, 2012; ISBN 978-0830810918).

[Leading Life-Changing Small Groups](#) by Bill Donahue. Great tips on leading small groups of all kinds (Zondervan, 2012; ISBN 978-0310331254).

[Walking the Small Group Tightrope: Meeting the Challenges Every Group Faces](#) by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson. The authors help you understand and deal with six dynamic areas every group leader must manage in order to create genuine, transforming small-group community (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310252290).

[Why Didn't You Warn Me?](#) by Pat J. Sikora. This focused guide trains the novice or experienced small-group leader to deal effectively with challenging group members (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).