

# *How to LEAD a SMALL GROUP*

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You can have the best prepared Bible study possible, designed using the Hook, Book, Look and Took template, and yet your Bible study can go badly simply because you lack the necessary small group leadership skills. Equally, you can have a very average Bible study prepared and the group can go well, because you are skilled in leading a small group.

One of the most useful assets in youth ministry is the ability to critique your own skill levels, not in a way that causes you to feel discouraged, but in a way that inspires you to do better next time. In order to help you in this process we will look here at five criteria to measure your small group leadership effectiveness by, and for each of these you will learn some specific strategies you can employ that will improve your ability to lead next time.

# 1. INVOLVEMENT

**Criteria 1: Everyone contributed at a level at which they felt comfortable.**

The world is divided into introverts and extroverts. Introverts are people who, when asked a question, pause, think, come up with six possible responses and then speak out the best one. Extroverts on the other hand, are people who, when asked a question also come up with six possible responses but instead of pausing, they start to speak out all six and eventually settle on the best one. In other words, introverts do their thinking in their head, while extroverts think out loud. In reality these labels are not two separate boxes but two extremes on a scale on which all of us fit somewhere. Where young people fit will impact the way they contribute to your discussion.

It is important to realise this because the first criteria to measure your effectiveness by is *not* “Everyone contributed equally”, but “Everyone contributed equally *at a level at which they felt comfortable.*” If you try to get everyone to contribute equally the introverts will leave your small group complaining that they felt pressured to share, while the extroverts will complain that you kept trying to get them to be quiet! Your goal is to have the introverts leave the room saying, “That was great – I got to say six

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*There’s nothing quite like the dynamic give and take of an effective small group discussion. In the process of asking and answering questions, thinking things through, listening, and evaluating, people learn. They learn about themselves, how to relate to others, how to dig deeper and really understand an issue, and how to find answers. Take the lead and keep them talking in circles.<sup>1</sup>*

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things and everybody listened to me!” while the extroverts will be saying, “That was great – I got to say sixty six things and everybody listened to me!”

So how do we make this happen? The first thing you can do is help the introverts safely **break the sound barrier**. Because they have a few possible answers in their head and because they have yet to determine which one is right, an introvert may fear speaking out too soon in case their answer is ridiculed by others. So very early on in your Bible study ask a question for which there is no right or wrong answer – one that merely calls for an opinion. Explain that you’ll go round the group and everyone will have the chance to say what they think. People are allowed to either pass or say

“My answer is the same as that person’s”. Begin with someone you know is an extrovert, allowing introverts more time to think. As answers are shared be sure to offer encouragement. For the introvert not only do they get to hear themselves contribute to the group (break the sound barrier), but they are also affirmed, giving them confidence to contribute further and not to be so fearful of the reaction to answers that are not yet fully thought through.

Another useful strategy is called the **parting invitation**. Here we give space to the introverts to contribute by saying “Is there anyone else who has something to add before we move on to the next question?” This causes the extroverts to go quiet as they have said all they wanted to say and are eager to move on, and gives space for the introverts to express the thoughts they have been carefully formulating while listening to others before a new question is considered.

***From experience...***

*As an introvert I recall sitting in Bible studies as a teenager listening intently to what others had to say and using their thoughts to shape my own contribution. Just when I was ready to speak the leader would say “OK, next question!” and I would have to start the process all over again. So I would listen again, deciding what I thought and when I was about to share again the leader would say, “OK, next question!” I was sure people concluded because of my silence I had nothing worthwhile to contribute.*

A third strategy is called **loving exclusion**. It involves discouraging the more talkative ones from dominating by saying things like, “What do others think about what [name] just said?” The question immediately cuts this one extrovert out of the conversation but does so in a way that doesn’t leave them feeling hurt. When a second person shares their thoughts you can ask, “So what do others think about what [name] and [name] just said?” Now we have cut two people out and have provided more space for the introverts to speak up and share their thoughts.

Finally watch for **body language**. People who are a little reluctant to share frequently give off non verbal signals before talking such as moving forward on their chair or starting to open their mouth. Scan your eye over the group pausing momentarily at each person as these people will often wait for you to make eye contact before speaking up.

## 2. DIRECTION

<b>Criteria 2: The group stayed on track and covered all that God intended.</b>
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You don't have to lead a Bible study group for teenagers long before you are confronted with the inevitable sidetrack. Whether it's a joke they've heard, a story from school, or something they have seen on TV or the movies, some teenagers they will want to break in and share their thoughts, whether they are relevant or not.

Alternatively, it's not uncommon to find that a discussion takes a turn in an unexpected direction – one that covers different but important ground. You as a leader are then confronted with the decision to either head in this new direction, or guide the group back to the questions previously prepared.

Some of the best  
sidetracks are actually  
"God tracks".

In both instances it is worth noting that this criteria requires that you ask yourself if you covered all that *God* intended in your Bible study – not that you covered all your questions. There is a difference, and of course it's not always easy to tell if we got it right. Often it's only in hindsight we get a sense of whether or not we made the right call at the right time.

In order to better fulfil the requirements of this criteria learn to assess sidetracks as they arise. Sometimes a story or a joke from a young person can "loosen up" a quiet group and make them more ready to share when you direct them back to the topic. Other times it can destroy the moment. Learn to discern the difference before the sidetrack takes hold.

When assessing a sidetrack keep in mind the following three "laws". The first is the **law of participation**. When discussion moves in a new direction note how many are participating. Is it just one or two or is most of the group engaged? Are quieter ones showing signs of opening up and sharing when previously they had been quiet?

The second law is the **law of profit**. Is the topic one of value that might profitably edify the group? Is it a topic you can use to challenge or encourage them? Or is it one of little value?

The third law is the **law of presence**. Do you have a sense in your own spirit that God is directing the discussion in this new direction? Or do you sense a check within and a prompting to return to the original question?

When all three laws seem to be in alignment allow the change in direction but be aware that this shift may be brief, or may need to last for the rest of the Bible study.

### 3. INTERACTION

**Criteria 3: Discussion took place with minimal involvement from the leader.**

One of the most satisfying moments in leading a small group is when we get to lean back in our chair and watch the conversation between young people fly back and forth. It is that moment when they forget we are there, so engaged are they in conversation with one another.

Yet as fulfilling as that moment is, often we as small group leaders inadvertently do all we can to prevent it. A common mistake is the temptation to make a comment on every person's contribution. Imagine that you start a Bible study holding a ball of string. As you get underway with your first question you take hold of the end of the string and pass the ball to the first person to speak. They in turn hold on to the string and pass the ball to the next person to speak. At the end of the group time you look down on the pattern made and notice that instead of a random pattern of conversation it is in fact a "to-ing and fro-ing" of the string between you and each person who speaks. Not only are you interrupting the natural flow of conversation but you are teaching the young people *not* to engage in conversation with each other. Instead your group discussion has become a series of dialogues between you and each individual young person.

There are a number of strategies you can use to avoid this, the most important being **engagement**. Resist the urge to over engage the group by adding your own comments to everyone's contribution. Sometimes we think our role is to immediately correct or affirm every comment made by a young person. Instead of doing this right away encourage the group to respond to what someone has said, initially by simply asking "What do others think?" Over time this simply becomes "Uh huh" and eventually a silence, that invites a response from others.

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*The more a leader tries to dominate a small group Bible study, the more young people will simply be content to sit back and let them.*

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A second strategy is one of **environment** and has to do with creating a setting that is conducive to sharing. Ensure everyone sits in a circle and can see everyone else. That will encourage sharing between group members. If you can have everyone sitting on seats at the same level that will promote equal sharing.

*From experience...*

*When leading a younger group that were apt to be somewhat noisy I would try to sit in a chair which was a little higher than theirs and be in a position to view the whole group. In contrast one of our leaders of a Bible study group for older teens used to sit on the floor looking up at the group who sat in chairs. Seated in that position enabled him to facilitate a group in which the young people talked to each other about the questions he posed. In a sense he was trying to be “out of sight, out of mind”.*

## 4. VULNERABILITY

**Criteria 4: Young people communicated beyond a superficial level.**

A danger we face in our small groups is that they lapse into some sort of academic exercise with young people giving superficial answers – the ones they think we want to hear. Nothing ignites a group more than honesty, transparency and vulnerability. When one person takes a risk and goes a little deeper it gives others the freedom and confidence to do the same.

As noted in the previous chapter, young people can take time to acquire the developmental maturity required to share at depth about their thoughts and feelings. You may have tried to encourage this only to become disillusioned by the awkward silences or immature responses that followed. Here are some pointers to assist you as you try again.

Firstly, **persevere** and don't lower your expectations by not asking the deeper questions. If necessary skip over questions in order to ensure you have time to ask those questions that call for greater vulnerability. If you never ask the deeper questions young people will never go deeper in their responses.

Secondly, be **patient** and give young people space to think about their answer. Don't be afraid of some silence. If it seems like no one is going to share, you go first. Share your own experiences and struggles, past or present then ask the young people if any of them can identify with what you have said and if so, to describe what happened.

Thirdly, **praise** those young people who *do* have the courage to share. By creating an atmosphere of affirmation you will encourage others to talk about their personal experiences and responses to what you are discussing. At times young people may threaten to destroy this atmosphere with ridicule. If that happens speak firmly and lovingly, explaining your refusal to tolerate such behaviour. Challenge the whole group to work together to create a safe place for everyone to be honest and real.

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*By the time a community of care has formed...the group members are no longer mere acquaintances but have experience of being open and honest with each other. They are becoming more and more comfortable with lovingly confronting and encouraging each other. Jesus and His values are becoming central to the group. The group is becoming a place of Life.<sup>2</sup>*

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## 5. ENCOUNTER

<b>Criteria 5: People experienced a “God moment”.</b>
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This final criteria for an effective small group is the most important one of all. We can succeed in the other four areas but if this fifth criteria is not met our small group may be no better than a secular discussion group, because no lasting fruit will be borne in the lives of those taking part.

What is a “God moment”? It is not just something dramatic such as falling down under the influence of the Spirit, hearing an audible voice from God or experiencing healing for an ailment. God may at times do these things but more commonly a “God moment” is far less apparent though perhaps no less profound.

It may simply be an **“aha” experience**, such as that moment we have all had when something in Scripture really made sense to us,

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*Transformational youth ministry isn't ultimately about our programs, resources and experiences, but about young people encountering the presence of God and submitting to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.<sup>3</sup>*

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perhaps for the first time. We knew the facts of what it said but in that moment those facts found their way from our head into our heart.

A “God moment” can also happen when a young person comes to your Bible study and are upset or weighed down by something that may be happening at home or at school. During the course of discussion something is said that seems to be just for them, such is its relevance and the **sense of hope** it brings. Or it may be that in your small group you spend time praying for someone and as they head home that night nothing in their world has changed, other than the fact that there is now a peace that passes all understanding<sup>4</sup> that they experienced as they met with their peers in your small group.

A “God moment” is also evident when a young person goes away from your Bible study with a determination to **apply** what they have been learning. Such an attitude is evidence of God at work and there is nothing more satisfying than having a teenager share the results of their obedient application of God’s Word as taught in your Bible study.

There are many other “God moments” to be had that include a sense of encouragement, conviction and comfort. All these are the work of the Holy Spirit and when they are happening regularly in the life of your small group Bible study, young people will want to keep coming, not just because their friends are there or because they like you. They will come because it is a place where they and others regularly encounter God.

#### *From experience...*

*We used to end our time of Bible study by inviting prayer requests and then trying to remember them as we prayed. It was hard work trying to remember them all, but then I found a better way. When a need was shared we’d stop right there and pray for the person. Not only did this save us having to make sure no need was forgotten, but we found it to be a far more powerful way of having God minister to each person through us.*

The question that arises then is “How do I create a God moment? What strategies can I employ that will give some guarantee that God will show up and transform lives?” I have pondered this for some time and have decided that the only thing I can do is pray. God is not compelled to jump whenever I presses all the correct leadership buttons. I do not have to try to “make” anything happen - I leave it to Him. Realising this makes a time

of prayer essential before the group gathers to study Scripture, and yet how often do we spend hours in preparation and only moments in prayer? If “God moments” are what bear fruit then all our careful preparation can be wasted if it is not accompanied by earnest prayer.

What should you pray? Well firstly pray for **each individual** in your group that they would be drawn by God to attend and that God would in some way encounter them through a “God moment”. Allow God to direct your prayer. For some you will pray for greater understanding while for others you might feel led to pray for comfort or conviction. Pray for those who don’t yet know Him that they would commit their lives to Him as a result of an encounter with Him.

Pray too for **yourself**. Pray that you would remain sensitive to God’s voice as you lead, and that you would have the courage to take a risk when you sense His prompting. In doing so always avoid taking a risk that might embarrass a young person. God will never lead us to divulge some secret such as a sin they are struggling with. He will however reveal things to us in order that He might bless them.

## CHECKLIST:

- I give introverts space to think and opportunity to contribute in a Bible study.
- I carefully weigh any sidetracks and if necessary, set my Bible study questions.
- I avoid the temptation to comment on each person contribution in the group.
- I create opportunities for young people to share at depth without feeling pressured.
- I pray before I lead a Bible study, asking God to touch and change each person.

### ***From experience...***

*I was nearing the end of a Bible study with some young teens when I felt prompted to stop and invite any who had a need to request prayer. I was a little nervous at this because I certainly don’t have a 100% reliable hotline to God, but I took a risk and provided this opportunity. The invitation was met with a stony silence and some blank faces. Then, as I scanned around the group I noticed that one girl looked to be having an inner struggle. In looking at her I held my gaze a little longer and when her eyes met mine she started to speak. “Yes,” she said shyly “I think I want to become a Christian.” It was a God moment that affected the whole group as others shared what life was like for them since committing their life to Christ.*

## **For REFLECTION and DISCUSSION**

1. Do you tend to be more of an extrovert or an introvert when participating in a Bible study? What experiences have you had that illustrate this?
2. Have you ever found yourself in a Bible study group which went in an unexpected direction that turned out to be beneficial? Share your experience.
3. How hard has it been getting your small group to interact with each other in your Bible studies? What have you tried to do, successfully or unsuccessfully to overcome any difficulties you have had?
4. What fears do you think young people have that make them reluctant to share at depth in a small group? How can you help them overcome these fears?
5. Describe some of the “God moments” you have experienced in your life. What impact did these have upon you?

### **Prayer:**

Ask God to help you improve your ability to lead Bible studies by implementing the things you have learnt in this session.

### **Practical insights which I will apply:**

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>1</sup> Veerman, D. *Small Group Ministry With Youth*, Victor Books, 1992, p.77
  - <sup>2</sup> West, L & Hopkins, P. *The D Factor*, Monarch Books, 2001, pp.115,116
  - <sup>3</sup> King, M. *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, IVP Books, 2006, p.86
  - <sup>4</sup> *Philippians 4:17*