

Leading Good Discussions

If you intend to have an impact with groups of adults, you need to acquire the skill of leading discussions. Adults learn and retain by speaking the facts themselves, not just sitting and hearing someone else speak.

A group discussion usually needs a leader if the group is five or more. A good group discussion is going to include the ideas from everyone in the group so a leader is needed for traffic control. Some participants will be too ready to talk and others will be reticent.

Since you as the leader want to hear from everyone in the group, you have a responsibility as you guide the discussion to encourage participation from those who are less verbal and minimize participation from those who could monopolize.

Sometimes the effective discussion leader needs to ask intriguing, challenging, or provocative questions to move the group to further thought. Sample questions when the group is not making much progress could be:

- Do you agree with what she is saying? Why or why not?
- Do you think there is a better way to get this done?
- What do you think would happen if we did this?

Brainstorming is a technique used in discussions to broaden the creative thought. To utilize this, first explain to the participants that brainstorming rules say that no one can be critical of another's comments. There can be a time when people disagree, but save that for later. Brainstorming allows each person to think outside the normal box.

If the desired outcome is to increase knowledge for participants, as in a class setting or a staff meeting, then one necessary component is the art of summarizing. After one or more persons have given an answer to a crucial question, the leader summarizes by bringing out the preferred information. One way I have found useful to summarize is to take notes on the white board of the comments being made as they fit into an outline of desired information.

Seek feedback during and following the discussion to verify the discussion was productive. This is done best with open-ended questions.

Here are some specific rules to help you become a good discussion leader for client groups.

1. Know your desired outcome. Why are you having this discussion? When you know why you want to have a discussion, then you know how to guide the discussion. There is a big difference between having a discussion to impart new information/knowledge and having a discussion to clarify thinking. When you know your goal, you will find it easier to keep on track.
2. Some potential reasons to engage a group in a discussion include:

- (a) Inspire curiosity in a topic or concern
 - (b) Get participants to make their own discoveries by contrasting their views with the views of others
 - (c) Discover levels of understanding within the group
3. If you do not know your desired outcome, you will tend to stray far and end up wondering if it was all a waste of time...and probably it would be.
 4. Commit to seeing yourself as a facilitator and not the guru with all the answers. Understand the wisdom of the statement, "It's not about me." If you do not do this, you will tend to dominate the conversation and keep the participants from actual growth.
 5. Be aware of the physical surroundings to prevent as many distractions as possible. Many times clients will enter into discussions easier if they are able to sit around a table rather than in a circle, with less concern about their physical appearance.
 6. Be prepared. Know enough about the topic for discussion that you do not permit the propagation of false information or error. Without this, your integrity will be in question and in some cases, you will have the proverbial egg on your face.
 7. Learn the art of affirming, even when the person has not been the most articulate. Without this skill, you will end up having fewer and fewer people making comments out of fear of inadequacy. Sometimes when a person gives wrong information, you can respond with something appreciative of their participation without giving agreement to their comment. An example would be, "Well, Steve, I really like the way you speak clearly, and I am glad you shared that, because I want to talk about some new information in that area." Of course, before the discussion is completed, you will be careful to review and clarify the accurate information.
 8. Plan the time. Have a solid introduction that clearly states what the topic of the hour is, and then ask an introductory type question. Have several questions prepared that get more and more challenging. Always close the discussion with review, either one that you have developed or ask for feedback from the participants, e.g. "What is the most important thing we gained today from this discussion?"



The role of discussion in the process of working with clients in a Rescue Mission is major. Chapels and counseling are both important but every staff person needs to look for opportunities for small group discussions. We want to follow Jesus' example!