

60 SMALL GROUP TIPS

By Vince Antonucci (adapted for our Grace Fellowship context)

Leading a small group is an amazing way to make a difference with your life. Small group studies are powerful vehicles for catalyzing life change and spiritual growth. Perhaps the idea of leading a small group sounds exciting but also intimidating. Maybe you've never done it. Or it could be that you've led a group but feel like you could be more effective. Here are 60 tips.

TIPS LEADING TO YOUR GROUP'S FIRST MEETING - ENVIRONMENT

1. Pray! A successful group will be a God thing, so pray that God blesses your leadership and helps your group to be everything He has in mind.
2. Confirm the details with your potential attendees, even if they already know. Send an email clearly letting everyone know the details.
3. Before people show up, turn on every light on the floor of the house where they'll be entering. Making it bright will create a warm environment.
4. Before people show up, turn on some background music. Coming into a house with music playing is more inviting. Make sure to turn the music off once you're ready to begin your meeting.
5. Before people show up, have your couch/chairs set up in a circle and ready to go.
6. Greet people at the door with a big smile. Let them know that in the future they can come right in.
7. You may want to use name tags for the first meeting, especially if your group is fairly large.
8. Have food and a variety of beverage options. You don't have to make the food fancy, but you do need to have food. Food makes people feel comfortable and promotes interaction and conversation. See tips #28-30.

TIPS FOR YOUR GROUP'S FIRST MEETING-LEADING THE DISCUSSION

9. Once you're ready to begin, start with a good icebreaker question. Most people will be nervous to talk in group and getting *everyone* to say something early on will make it much easier for them to say more later. The Leader Guide will have an icebreaker question for you.
10. Speaking of icebreaker questions, creating a fun, open environment where we're interacting and laughing together will pay big dividends later in helping people to feel connected to and able to open up to each other. For the icebreaker question, I usually try to think of one that connects with and leads into the topic we'll be studying that night. (So, for instance, if we're looking at a Bible passage about marriage, I might ask, "Who is your favorite all-time TV family, and why?")
11. Keep the study fairly short and light, if you do a study at all. You might just have each person share a (short version) of their story. ("Why don't we each take 2-3 minutes to tell a little about ourselves, so we know who we're in group with. Tell us a bit of your background, maybe family, maybe job, maybe spiritually.")
12. You definitely want to share the purpose of the group and your vision for its future. Things like: In this group we're going to accept each other where we're at. We'll love and never judge. Confidentiality is also a value in this group. What happens in group, stays in group. We're going to grow closer to each other and to God. Use the *First Night Discussion Guide*, found at www.gracefellowship.cc/groupresources for this.
13. Cast a vision for multiplication. Talk about how we're all going to love this experience and wonder why we didn't get in a group sooner. And we're going to want others to experience what we are. That's why our church needs more and more groups, so everyone can get in one. In light of that, one of the hopes for this group is that future leaders will be developed so future groups can start out of ours.
14. Establish a group covenant that outlines expectations for the group. Ask everyone to make the group a priority, and to make it known if they won't be making it. Also emphasize that we will always practice acceptance and confidentiality.
15. Leave some time at the end of your meeting for prayer requests. Let everyone know that each week there will be an opportunity for them to share good things that we can celebrate together or things that require prayer.

16. Don't make anyone pray the first night. In the future, as people become more comfortable, you can challenge them to step out of their comfort zone, but don't push too hard too fast.
17. End your group on time. When the group time officially ends, don't force people out. If they linger and mingle for a while, that's a great sign the group is getting off to a healthy start. (However, as time goes on, you want to be considerate of your hosts.)

TIPS TO LEAD YOUR GROUP WELL AFTER YOUR FIRST MEETING

18. Don't try to be perfect. When you meet someone who acts like they're perfect, does that impress you? No! At best, it makes you feel like you can't relate. At worst, it makes you suspicious. People aren't looking for perfect; they're looking for *real*. Be real. Show some vulnerability. That will endear you to your people.
19. You don't need to have all the answers. You may feel like, since you're the leader, that you need to have an answer for every question. You don't. People will understand if you say, "I don't know. Let me try to find out the answer to that question this week." Not only will they understand they will admire your humility. It also may inspire them to think they too could lead a small group.
20. Don't be too formal. Don't run your group like a business meeting. You are creating a spiritual family, and your meetings should have a fun, comfortable feeling.
21. Allow a little messiness. People are messy, right? In group we don't want to put on a veneer of spiritual perfection that makes everyone feel like they can't be real and admit their weaknesses and fears. Messiness can be intimidating, but it's a breeding ground for grace.
22. View the people in your group as friends and family – not just group members. Affirm everyone who shares—even if they're a little theologically off. It takes courage to share in a group.
23. Do things outside of group time. When you take the group outside of your meeting night and outside of your living room relationships will grow deeper, faster. People probably want to meet outside of group time but need you as the leader to initiate it. So, have everyone go out for ice cream, or meet at the park for a cookout on Saturday, or ... you name it.

24. In addition to social events outside of group time, you will want to have your group serve together. One possibility is to mention your desire for your group to serve together after a couple of meetings and solicit ideas for where you might serve. Or you can look for serving options in your community and then bring your suggestions to the group. The Local Impact Dept. at the church can provide opportunities.
25. One issue with doing things outside of group night, in our fast-paced overly busy society, is that people may say they want to but don't have the time. One way of overcoming that issue is to do your non-meeting get-togethers on your group night. So instead of meeting for your normal living room Bible study, maybe once or twice a semester you meet at a homeless shelter where you serve dinner together.
26. With serving together outside of your group time, you can start small. Instead of making an ongoing commitment, try something one time, just to give people a taste and to set the precedent for your group.

TIPS RELATED TO HAVING FOOD AT YOUR GROUP MEETINGS

27. The first night of the group you or the host should supply the snacks. But on that first night, or sometimes the second night, establish a snack sign-up sheet or schedule. Have people take turns bringing the food, telling them it doesn't need to be amazing. Having people bring food increases their ownership and gives them another reason to show up on their nights.
28. Make sure the snacks are accessible. If you put the food in a room that is hard to get to or out of the way, they may never get touched.
29. Let people know if they are coming straight from work and need to bring dinner with them it's not a problem.
30. Giving out other rotating (or established) roles can also create ownership and increase attendance consistency. You may want to set up a rotation of who is going to lead the icebreaker question, or who records the prayer requests and who records the attendance in YourGraceChurch.

TIPS RELATED TO LEADING THE BIBLE STUDY DISCUSSION

31. A small group setting lends itself to group discussion, not to a lesson. People tend to learn better when they are actively involved and sitting in a circle makes a lesson feel awkward and a discussion feel natural. Grace Group leaders should speak only about 20% of the time.

32. One of your jobs as leader, is to facilitate a discussion that gets everyone involved. Think of a pinball machine. In the group discussion, the pinball is who is talking. Your role is to be the flipper. In pinball you don't score points when the ball is touching the flipper, and in a small group "winning" happens when people are thinking and talking, not when you're lecturing.
33. Ask open ended questions. Since you've been provided questions through the Leader Guide, you will be armed with open ended questions. However, you may ask questions on the fly, but don't ask yes or no questions as they will not create a conversation. Try to ask great follow-up questions too.
34. When you ask a question, expect silence. It will feel like forever, but in reality it will only be three or four seconds. Wait patiently. People need time to process the question and formulate an answer. They may need time to muster up the courage to talk out loud. Be comfortable with the silence.
35. If no one speaks, even after you allow silence, you will be tempted to give the answer to your question. Don't do it! Ask the question again, but in a different way. Rephrase it, which gives people more time to continue thinking, and the new way you're asking it may lead to an answer they hadn't come up with.
36. Don't get in the habit of giving the final answer at the end of each question's discussion. If you do, it will seem like there was a "right" answer you were waiting for and, since no one gave it, you are.
37. You can occasionally share your thoughts and opinions, but don't be the person who talks most.
38. Speaking of that person who talks the most: If the amount they talk is reasonable and not an issue, great. But if the person is always the first person to answer every question and dominates the conversation, that is *not* great. You may want to try, when you ask a question, saying something like, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't talked yet." Another strategy is to talk to the person outside of group and say something like, "I love how much you participate. I wish everyone felt as comfortable sharing with the group as you do. But some people don't. For some people it's difficult to talk. Actually, I wanted to ask you to partner with me in helping other people to participate more, just kind of hold back, that will give the more quiet people more of a chance to get their nerve up and say what they're thinking, instead of taking the easy way out and just letting you and I talk."

39. And, speaking of the people who won't talk: One way, again, to try to engage them is to say, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't shared yet." After your group has been meeting awhile and you feel confident it won't freak them out, you can even ask them a question directly, "Sally, what are you thinking? Seems like you might have an idea you want to share..." You may also want to encourage that person outside of group, "I love it when you share. You have such good things to say."
40. Prepare for the group time. Read the questions beforehand and think through the conversations you want to have. But remember, you don't need to have all the answers, and should not give all the answers.
41. As you work through the Leader Guide, don't feel compelled to ask every question. If the conversation is great and means you won't be able to get through all the questions, that's fine. Remember, it's only a guide, not a strict list you have to follow.
42. Also, remember that if a person shares something from their experience, go ahead and ask follow-up questions. Good follow-up questions come from great listening. Listen well. Listen for positive experiences, hurts or anything you may want to follow up with.
43. Make sure you always give your group an action step at the end of the discussion. We grow by taking action in our spiritual journey. Even small, regular steps toward Jesus-centered living will produce much fruit and movement into God's plans.

TIPS RELATED TO GROUP LEADER DEVELOPMENT

44. Always be on the prowl for someone with leadership potential, let him (or her) try leading. Give a bit of coaching beforehand (you could even use this article) and encourage them to give it a try. You should have discussed this on the first group night as you explain the goal of group multiplication. The Groups Team has several resources for identifying and training an apprentice.
45. Encourage your group to meet in your absence. If they don't, it gives the impression the group cannot exist without you. If you don't have anyone who is ready to lead a Bible discussion, then have the group meet for a game night, or to go out for ice cream, or watch a movie or serve in some outreach effort.
46. Eventually get the group out of the same living room. Someone else being the host will make the group stronger overall. You might try moving it to a different home every few months. When people step up to

host, that could be their first step toward leadership.

TIPS RELATED TO CARING FOR YOUR SMALL GROUP

47. It is crucially important that, to the extent possible, each small group plays its own part in caring for its members.
48. Create an environment of comforting and getting alongside each member so that they feel that there is someone who understands and cares for them.
49. Be proactive. Select a key person, who can assist you and the group, to track key dates, maybe birthdates; important anniversaries; hospital stays; loss of loved ones or significant dates in people's lives. This will help you take your good intentions and help you put them on paper, iPhone; iPad; computer or whatever tracking system you choose to use. Use technology to share, store and remind you of important dates within your group.
50. Pass it on. If a member of your group is hospitalized, please ensure that you pass this news onto the rest of the group as well as the church caring team (care@gracefellowship.cc). This is important on a number of levels. If the church knows, we can support you in caring for the individual. We can support by praying and putting the particular need on the prayer wall, offering love and support to the extended family so that the person in hospital knows that both their group cares and the church cares. We are a family and there is nothing more devastating to hear that a loved one has been in hospital and no one knew. Obviously if a member does not want the church to know that is a different thing and we must respect them. Also, if a member is struggling with loss, grief or any other deep emotional hurt, please let us know so that we can offer love, support and help them through their difficult time.

TIPS RELATED TO INVITING PEOPLE INTO YOUR GROUP

51. Begin to pray that God will soften their hearts and create opportunities for the building of your friendship. Ask God to make it clear when the time is right to invite your friends to your group.
52. Invite them into your life long before inviting them to your group. Do things together. Serve them by delivering a meal when they are sick, watching their kids, and listening when they need to talk.
53. Slowly introduce them to others in your group. Invite an unsaved friend over for dessert and coffee the same night you invite friends from your

group. If they seem to connect well, look for ways to get them together in the future. The more "group people" your friend feels comfortable around, the less threatening an invitation to your group will be.

54. Start small. Invite them to "neutral" group functions—a cookout or social functions that include a short devotional may be ways to ease your friends into the spiritual aspects of the group.
55. Talk about the benefits. When the opportunity arises, casually share with them how the group has been a blessing in your life.
56. When you sense the time is right, simply ask your friends if they would like to attend your group the next time you meet.
57. If they say no, don't become discouraged, and don't give up. Refuse to allow their negative response to cause an uncomfortable tension in your relationship. As you continue to be their friend, other opportunities will arise. When the timing seems right, ask again.
58. If they say yes, prepare them for the experience—it will reduce their anxiety. Let them know what you will wear. Describe the basic format of your group. If they have children, let them know what is available for the kids. (If your group doesn't provide for childcare you might want to offer to arrange childcare for them.)

SOME FINAL TIPS

59. Remember that your ultimate goal is to grow your group members in their spiritual disciplines moving toward living Jesus-centered living while taking their next steps of faith. And secondly, to build deep, intentional community with each other.
60. Have your group pray for your group! Send out prayer requests or have your group write down prayer requests and encourage everyone to pray for each other daily.

Overwhelmed? Don't be! These are just tips, not rules. Every group is unique. That being said, all groups have room to improve, so hopefully you've pinpointed a couple of tips that can help yours!