



Effective Group Leadership

Common Group Dynamics

A key component of healthy, well-functioning groups is that members feel safe and loved enough to be able to share openly and honestly. Keep in mind that there is no such thing as an *unproblematic* group member—we all have sin patterns and ways of interacting that are more or less useful depending on the social context. We are all also fiercely loved by God and made in his image, and thus we interact with each other using Christ-centered grace and unconditional positive regard (i.e., value and respect for the person).

There are a variety of ways people approach their role in a group. Some people are very introverted and quiet, others love to talk and don't mind being the center of attention. How a person interacts in a group is shaped by many things, and by and large there is plenty of room in any group for diverse personality types and viewpoints. However, there are some dynamics that members bring to a group that can hinder either the development of the group at large, or the ability of that specific member to get the most out of their group experience. As a leader, your role then becomes addressing that dynamic to facilitate a meaningful experience for both the group at large and its individual members. Below are some common dynamics that crop up in life groups and Bible studies.

General Guidelines for Addressing Challenging Dynamics

- Pray! Ask God for guidance about how to handle the situation.
- Do a self-check: Is this a dynamic that happens to be irritating just to you, or is it legitimately problematic for a broader range of people within the group?
- Determine the extent of the group disturbance: Is it limited to a couple of people? Or is it impacting the group as a whole?
- Evaluate what stage of development your group is in and tailor your response accordingly.
- Approach the situation with compassion and Christ-centered unconditional positive regard.

Staying Silent – A member who rarely speaks up with any comment at all

- Assess the most likely reason for the silence, to the best of your ability
 - May involve asking the member directly
- Offer strategic opportunities to share in the group
 - Ask a nonthreatening direct question
 - Structure a group session in such a way that everyone is given time to share
 - To avoid putting just one person on the spot, you can inquire generally about if anyone who hasn't shared would like to
 - Consider providing the questions/discussion points you will cover in advance so that people who need more time to process can do so before the group session

Monopolizing – A member who takes up much of the group time with their own voice

- Evaluate whether this is a habitual pattern, or a more isolated occurrence linked to, for example, a particular stressor or difficulty the member is facing
- Gentle guidance is sometimes enough (e.g., “I want to make sure everyone who wants to share gets a chance to tonight”)
- More direct intervention is often necessary when the monopolizing is combined with frequently interrupting others; Try affirming the monopolizing member, but then immediately returning to the interrupted person, e.g., “That’s a good idea, Tory. I’d also like to go back to what you were saying, Jane.”
- If it is very persistent over time, a one-on-one conversation with the member is likely in order
- Consider whether the member needs an additional source of support outside of the group

Help-Rejecting Complaining – A member who frequently brings up personal difficulties or problems, but does not accept any guidance or advice from the group, nor does anything to resolve the issue on their own or apply scriptural wisdom to alter their perception of it

- Because it takes repeated exposure to this pattern to identify it, this can be a tricky one to manage
- Consider whether this is simply a case of chronic stressors
 - Ongoing problems the person has no power to change warrant support and empathy from the group
 - Offer sound biblical encouragement which affirms God is trustworthy, loving, and walks with us through difficulty
- This can come up when a group tries to “fix” a problem, but what the person really is looking for is empathy
 - Try focusing on and affirming their feelings instead of offering advice
- Ask open ended questions like, “How can the group support you as you work through this problem?”

Oversharing – Disclosing very personal information at inappropriate times, or sharing personal information about others that is not theirs to share

- This is often a self-correcting problem, as the group will not know what to do and respond with silence, which can be enough of a cue that a misstep was made.
 - As the leader, don’t leave the person hanging; Try saying, “Wow, I’m impressed you trusted us enough to share so much about yourself” or “It took a lot to share that, and I know I speak for the group when I say we want to be here to support you if we can.”
 - Often this happens only sporadically, if the person is having a particularly hard day or facing a particular stressor; If so, it won’t necessarily need intervention unless it becomes chronic
- Help establish clarity in the group around what constitutes gossip
 - It’s one thing to ask for prayer and support about a relationship difficulty; It is another to share personal, embarrassing, or disparaging information about another person.
- If necessary, revisit confidentiality expectations within the group, reiterating that everything shared (including overshared!) in the group stays within the group

Emotional Sensitivity – A member who is easily upset, expresses deep emotion frequently, or has high emotional support needs

- Empathy can go a long way toward diffusing strong emotional expression - Sometimes people just want to feel seen, heard and understood. Don't underestimate the power of a simple, "I see how hard this is for you, and I can hear your sadness. I am sorry things are so difficult right now."
- Sometimes reframing the issue from a cognitive standpoint balances out the emotions by engaging the analytical side of the brain
 - Ask: "What do you think about that?" or "What does the logical side of your brain tell you about this issue?"
 - The act of reading Scripture also engages cognitive processes; Try asking the person to read a relevant verse or passage.
- Carefully assess whether the member needs support which exceeds the capacity and/or appropriateness of the group setting
 - Life groups are a place where people give and receive support, but they are *not* support or therapy groups
 - Grace Community Church keeps a list of trusted counseling and therapy referrals that you can share with your group member
- This may be an isolated incident, or become a more chronic pattern
 - It is not uncommon for high stress to drive a person to seek out a group, and they may "dump" that stress on the group initially and then feel better
 - More ongoing issues may require more attention and/or a consult with a pastor or other appropriate staff member

Controversial Theological Beliefs – Sharing beliefs that fall outside of right Christian teaching, or which are sources of debate

- Determine whether the issue is of primary (i.e., essential to the gospel) importance; If it is, gentle correction is warranted.
 - Such correction is best provided with specific biblical references - It may be very useful for the group as a whole to look up and examine the biblical evidence together.
- If the issue is a secondary issue (i.e., one on which Christians can freely disagree and still be within the realm of orthodox teaching), make clear that there is room for multiple viewpoints
 - Members are free to express their viewpoints, provided they can do so while maintaining respect and kindness
- Avoid shaming or putting others down for their beliefs. Gently correct, and trust the Holy Spirit to illuminate truth for them