

How to Deal with Difficult People in a Small Group

I. General Principals

1. If group members expect to grow, people will have to be vulnerable.
2. All small groups undergo some type of relational difficulty.
3. When one is a part of a nurturing small group, problems will come to the surface.
4. It is the leader's job to help steer the group in the right direction.
5. Any solution must simultaneously promote the health and wholeness of the individual and the total group.
6. None of the following techniques are 100% successful.
7. Keep your language soft, kind, and caring, even while correcting or re-directing.
8. Emotionally embrace the difficult person in the group, while setting boundaries or ground rules.

II. Issue #1 – The Overly Talkative Member

1. The Talker is usually very uncomfortable with periods of silence.
2. The Talker is usually fearful of true intimacy or personal disclosure.
3. The Talker can dominate and direct the conversation unless the leader intervenes.
4. Sometimes, The Talker can seem to be dogmatic, and not be tolerant of other views.
5. Sometimes, The Talker can ramble, and take the conversation in a "tangent" direction.

Recommendations:

1. Set some ground rules at the start of your group:
 - No interrupting
 - We are going to encourage everyone to contribute to the discussion
 - It is ok to have periods of silence – it may even promote a new thought
 - All ideas are valued, even if we disagree
 - We will focus on the evidence which leads one to an opinion
 - We will recognize that different people may have different interpretations of the "evidence"
 - When we disagree, we will only be allowed to ask clarifying questions – to make sure we understand the other person's viewpoint
 - We will not become emotional or ridicule or attack each other when we disagree
 - We will use language which promotes peace and love even when we disagree
2. The leader is responsible for gently reminding people of these agreements whenever they are violated.
3. When the conversation gets going in a "tangent" direction – "This is a very interesting idea which we should pursue at another time". Then, ask the original question, or ask for another opinion on the central idea being discussed.
4. When a controversial idea is presented, acknowledge the validity of differences of opinion on a topic:
 - "This is a topic where thoughtful people may have legitimate disagreements".
 - "We are going to discuss a controversial topic, and I expect that we will have many conflicting ideas about this topic".
 - "This is a topic which may have multiple correct answers. Let's learn from each other's experience and opinions".
5. When a controversial opinion is expressed, ask "what do others think about this question"?
6. If all else fails, suggest that we go around the circle, letting each person talk in turn (or "pass" if they wish).

III. Issue #2 – The Answer Person

1. Many sincere group members throw around easy answers, simply quoting a verse, or becoming wrapped up in some minute theological trivia having nothing to do with the group discussion.
2. These people will often go to great lengths to make sure their opinions are heard and validated.
3. These people sometimes become argumentative, judgmental, or don't listen to opposing ideas.
4. The "Answer Person" can dismantle the atmosphere which makes it safe to disagree.

Recommendations:

1. Re-state the various conflicting ideas, and validate that there might be no right answer.
2. Affirm the Answer Person, "That is one point of view" and ask, "What do others think"?
3. Avoid arguing about who is right or wrong. Instead, ask for the evidence behind the opinions. Then ask, "are there alternative interpretations of the evidence?"
4. If someone is using "pat answers" or "clichés", ask them for the meaning of their words. "How does that really work?" "What does that really mean?"
5. If the Answer Person becomes a continual problem for the Small Group, talk to them between meetings:
 - Describe to them how their dogmatic answers can prevent others from expressing alternative views.
 - Affirm their right to their opinion, and help them recognize the right for others to have different opinions (Romans 14).
 - Have the person share more "evidence" instead of "opinion" to inform the discussion.
 - Suggest starting a statement with "Others may disagree, but this is what I think".

IV. Issue #3 – The Member with an Agenda

1. Some people are prone to try to prove themselves by dominating a group.
2. Watch for phrases like "Yes, but" or "Well, I think".
3. This person tends to demean another person while establishing their own importance.

Recommendations:

1. Reaffirm, reestablish, challenge, or redefine – the agreed upon guidelines for the group.
2. "Let's focus on our topic." Let's put your interesting idea in the "parking lot" for future discussion.
3. "Let's choose to be open to new ideas, and ask clarifying questions instead of being critical."

V. Issue #4 – Superficial Discussions

1. Superficial discussion is normal at the start of a small group. No one wants to be vulnerable until they feel safe.
2. Superficial discussion can also be a sign that the group leader is expecting vulnerability before the group is ready to be vulnerable with each other.
3. The group leader can help by being first to be vulnerable: tell a story about yourself which makes you vulnerable to potential criticism. Be humble and available for potential critical reactions: "No one is perfect. We can learn from each others' experiences and mistakes. I'll begin by telling a story about a time when I wish I had done better." "I'll start by telling you how I think. Feel free to disagree with me."
4. Ask "open-ended questions" such as "How has this topic been influential in your life". Or, "Do you know someone who has experienced difficulty in this area?"
 - If silence occurs, it may be that people are just thinking, not necessarily reluctant. If silence continues, restate the question with different words, or ask if the question you are posing is clear and understandable.

Top Ten Problems during discussion

1. **Dead Silence**-My group is totally silent after I ask a question.
 - a. If the question was good, relax. People need time to think.
 - b. If the question wasn't good or just seemed to miss the point, ask one of the backup questions you've prepared to rephrase the question.
 - c. Encourage them with both nonverbal and verbal communication.
2. **A wrong answer**-The biggest problem I have is when someone gives the wrong answer.
 - a. Use discernment. Determine if it's a wrong answer or just a perspective different from yours.
 - b. Be gracious and gentle. Don't get flustered.
 - c. Redirect the question to the rest of the group.
 - d. If it's an off-the wall response, say something like, "That's an interesting thought. How did you come to that conclusion?"
3. **Disastrous distractions**-Every week in the middle of group some distraction always comes up.
 - a. Tell everyone to turn off their cell phones
 - b. If the group continually has schedule conflicts, re-evaluate the group time
 - c. Whatever the interruption, don't lose patience.
 - d. If necessary, put a sign on the door. Let everyone know that this is the time to set away all distractions.
4. **The Difficult Question**-
 - a. Admit you don't have a good answer, but tell them you'll look into it. It could be a great question for them to research and bring back to the group.
5. **Can't Finish the Lesson**-
 - a. a. If the basic problem is that they like to talk and share too much at the beginning of the group: Set boundaries from the very start.
 - b. If they need more time to talk, set aside a separate time outside of group. If the problem is spending too long on each question.
 - c. Pace yourself on each question. Move on if you've been discussing it too long.
6. **The Non-Stop Talker**-There is this guy who just talks and talks.
 - a. Direct your questions to other members in the group
 - b. Sit next to the talkative person and minimize eye contact.
 - c. If it's still a problem, ask for the talker's help in drawing out quiet members or privately ask him to keep his answers to a minimum.
7. **The Silent Member**-
 - a. Ask direct but low-risk questions a shy person could answer comfortably.
 - b. Sit where you can maintain good eye contact with those who seem reluctant to speak out.
 - c. Give positive feedback when the shy person does respond to encourage further responsiveness.
8. **Going off on tangents**-
 - a. Try to be diplomatic and reflect an accepting attitude
 - b. Use a good question to put the discussion back on track.
 - c. Keep each other accountable by have a code word to bring things back
9. **Disagreements and Conflict**
 - a. Don't let disagreements rattle you. Often they aid learning
 - b. If two people disagree on a certain point, it may be profitable to talk about the two opinions
10. **Leader answering all the questions**
 - a. Rather than tell them the answer, help them discover it for themselves. Direct another question to a specific person in the group. "Judy, what are some things Paul says about love in this passage?"
 - b. Relay the question back to the whole group, "That's a good question. What do you all think?"