

Dealing with Challenging Group Dynamics

Pastor Justin Schoolcraft and Bren Tally, LCMFT

The goal for any small group is growth that leads to a deeper relationship with God. What we recognize in small groups ministry is that conversation with believers is vital to that process. In order for that kind of conversation to occur, though, the group must feel like a safe space.

Creating safe space is hard work – maybe harder than we have previously considered. This document is to help small group leaders respond to challenges in a group when they arise. Specifically, we want leaders to have a sense for what to do in the event that a member of a group is sharing or acting inappropriately. By “inappropriately,” we do *not* mean “controversial” or “emotional.” We specifically mean those rare occasions in which someone dominates a group to the detriment of others, or repeatedly shares overtly offensive or out-of-context remarks that make conversation unmanageable. When that happens, what do you do? The temptation might be to ostracize that member, but that’s not what we want to happen! **Our hope is to model grace and accountability that reflects the love of Christ** when dynamics like this arise. Here’s a possible roadmap.

1. Make sure that everyone has signed a group member agreement. In that agreement is a clear statement indicating that the leader will initiate a conversation if dialogue arises that contradicts the standard of respect. For examples of expectations you will want to set, reference that group agreement [here](#).

2. Redirect in the moment. To redirect is to gracefully acknowledge a difficult comment yet pull the conversation back to the topic. This can be done with phrases like, “Thank you so much for sharing that. What does the rest of the group think about question number 3?” Or, “That sounds very difficult. I’m sorry. Maybe we could come back to that a little later.” Redirection is *not* intended for comments that are just heavy or controversial while still being respectful. In fact, we *want* people to be vulnerable and real. Instead, it may be necessary in the manner of these examples:

- *Leader: “What came to mind as you watched the video?” Member: “I just can’t stand my neighbor. He’s the worst and I hope bad things happen to him and people like him. No one in this group better be like my neighbor.” L: “It sounds like it’s really weighing on you – would you like to share more with me after the group? What do the rest of us think of the video?” [Of course, the issue is that this member’s comment makes others feel unsafe.]*
- *A leader asks how everyone is doing. One member names a struggle they are having – but he continually talks over people, avoids the topic of discussion, and generally tries to bring up his struggle over and over until it removes permission for others to speak, or for the leader to discuss the topic. [The issue here is **not** that someone names a struggle, even more than once – we want people to be able to do that so we can care for them! The issue is the frequency, intensity, and controlling nature of the comments, which may be an indication that mental health resources would better address the issue facing the member.]*

3. Talk to the group member in question in private if it is preventing the group from communicating effectively. Here are some possible things you could say to that person. There are lots of examples so that you can choose the one that feels right for the given situation.

- *“Hey, I notice you feel really comfortable sharing thoughts and personal experiences in our group. Would you mind helping me model and encourage others to feel comfortable speaking out like you?”*
- *“If I say, ‘can I interrupt you’ - let’s have it serve as a sign between us that I need your help opening up space for someone who hasn’t spoken yet.*
- *“Let’s work together to make the group feel safe for those who aren’t as comfortable as you.”*
- *It seems like you want the group to know _____ (about your battle with an illness? About your hard relationship with the church/or with another person?) As a newer small group, though, it may be a subject that takes some work before they feel comfortable responding well.*
- *This isn’t your intention when you share _____, but group members may shut down and not feel like their story matters, OR you may start to feel like the group has stopped listening to you.*
- *I know _____ is an important part of your story. Can we meet outside of group so I can hear more?*
- *Can I connect you with a congregational care pastor to help process things more?*
- *Can I connect you with a counselor (through our counseling referral ministry) so you can continue to process your story in a meaningful way with someone who is trained to be a really, good listener?*

4. If the problem persists, remind the person of the conversation you had with them and let them know that the expectations in the group agreement stand.

5. If the problem still persists, refer to Pastor Justin for a plan on how best to care for the individual and your group, which will draw upon the many supportive resources our church has to offer.

The goal here is twofold: maintaining a healthy and fun group for everyone, and encouraging real, healthy growth for persons who are struggling to participate well. Our goal is not to ostracize anyone, but to truly *care* for them in the way Jesus would have us. If we give the person a silent treatment or never confront the issue, we will not be truly helping them grow, and the whole group will feel uncomfortable. We want to emphasize one final time that this process is not intended for those who are sharing unique perspectives, heavy stories, or deep emotion. Those are signs of a safe space and are not to be deterred, even if you have different perspectives. This is instead when behavior emerges that makes the goal of the small group – conversation promoting spiritual growth – unattainable due to the impact that it creates.

Pastor Justin Schoolcraft: justin.schoolcraft@cor.org