

PART THREE

Building Relationships with Youth in Groups

Working with Groups

Much of your work with young people may involve working with them in groups—planning an activity, participating in a project, leading a group discussion or activity, going on a trip. More often than not, you will be working with teens in groups that have some purpose or goal to be achieved. Knowing how to work groups of young people is essential. This section brings you a variety of skills and suggestions for working effectively with groups.

Let's start with two basics for effective group work. Whatever the nature or purpose of your group, you will need to remember that there are basically two functions that have to be carried out in order for the group to work successfully. Those functions are called **Task** and **Maintenance** (Relationship) functions. **Task** functions are things that will enable the group to get the job done. **Maintenance** (Relationship) functions will help to maintain the relationships in the group so that not only does the job get done but everyone feels like a valued contributor.

The following charts outline some of the specific actions needed to carry out each of these functions. Try them out. Be aware that it is not your responsibility to **do** these functions but rather to ensure that they are being done (by you or group members) when necessary. You may notice that different members of the group will be doing these things naturally. Your job is to monitor and ensure the quality of the experience. Keeping an eye open for these functions will help you to better manage the life of the group.

TASK FUNCTIONS

(Getting the Job Done)

Initiating

Starting the discussion, proposing tasks, goals and actions; suggesting a procedure.

“Let’s write the ideas on the board and analyze them.”

Information or Opinion Seeking

Requesting facts or information about group concerns or opinions.

“How many people are going to attend?” “What do you all think about...?”

Information Giving

Providing facts or information about group topics or concerns.

“In the past five years, we have collected only 90% of the expected amount.”

Consensus Testing

Checking with the group to see how much agreement has been reached.

“Does anyone object to our doing this?” or “Could we go around quickly and let each person say a sentence about their view on this question?”

Summarizing

Pulling together related ideas; restating suggestions; offering a decision or conclusion for groups to consider.

“Those who have spoken thus far seem to have made these points....”

Clarifying

Interpreting ideas or suggestions; clarifying issues before the group.

“I think what she means is that we do not know if we can afford that program.”

MAINTENANCE FUNCTIONS

(Maintaining Relationships)

Encouraging

Being friendly, warm and respectful to others; showing regard for others.

"I am glad to see everyone here at the meeting."

Expressing Group Feelings

Sensing feelings within the group and sharing feelings with other members.

"I think we all need a break."

Harmonizing

Reconciling disagreements; reducing tension; getting people to explore differences.

"You would both be better off if you could be specific rather than just accusing one another."

Compromising

When your opinion is involved in a conflict, bring resolution through a compromise.

"I appreciate Jane's idea, but I see things very differently. Since we're pretty evenly divided between these ideas, I'd like to suggest we look for another option or concentrate on developing Jane's."

Gate Keeping

Attempting to keep communication channels open, inviting everyone to participate, suggest procedures that permit sharing remarks.

*"John is trying to say something and is being cut off."
"Mary, what do you think about what Paul is saying?"*

Process Observing

Watching how the group is operating; sharing these perceptions with the group.

"Haven't we gone pretty far afield in this discussion?"

Rules of Conversation

These are basic rules which may be shared with and modeled for your group as you begin the discussion. These will assist you in keeping on-track with a discussion and requiring “ownership” by the individual members.

- ➔ **Always speak for yourself, never for someone else.**
“I think . . .,” not we, he, she, they, some people think.
- ➔ **When speaking of someone who is in the group, address them personally.**
Instead of “John over there,” say “You, John....”
- ➔ **Don’t ask questions when you are really expressing your own opinion.**
Instead of saying, “Don’t you think that....”, say “I think that....”
- ➔ **Humor has its place, but don’t use it to avoid an honest, serious expression of your own feelings.**
- ➔ **For some people, answering a certain question may be too personal for them. Allow them to state their feelings about the question but then use your common sense in letting them pass.**

Guidelines for Small Group Behavior

Within a large group, young people often don’t get a chance to or feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings. This is why small groups can be so valuable. (It’s much harder to get lost or to hide in a group that numbers only eight.) As you know, much of what will be discussed and worked on will be within small groups. The following guidelines may help you and your group to get more out of the time you spend within the small group.

- If possible, meet the participants prior to the group gathering.
- Be prepared prior to the group gathering. Have all needed materials.
- Be sure that the environment is appropriate and supportive of the kind of activity or event that is planned.
- Be there as the group arrives. Unsupervised free time invites disruptive behavior.

- ☑ Greet the young people by name. Be genuinely happy to see them.
- ☑ Define the expected behavior for the kind of event they will be involved in.
(The difference between listening respectfully to a speaker or cutting loose during a wild game of volleyball.)
- ☑ Be specific when giving instructions and setting expectations.
- ☑ Ask for an agreement. (verbal contract) *Ask whether everyone understands and accepts the guidelines for the experience. Give them the opportunity to opt out if they need to. Agree on any changes to the original plan before you begin and review the appropriate consequences for deviation from the agreed upon standards.*
- ☑ Remind the group of their agreement (if needed). *If disruptive behaviors arise, remind the group of the guidelines set at the beginning of the meeting. Do not single out one person to discipline. That is a nonproductive way to keep order. It also puts the young person on the spot in front of others and can be very frightening.*

Also, remind the group or individuals of guidelines with nonverbal cues: a serious look, a hand gesture, silence, etc.
- ☑ Affirm desired behavior.
- ☑ Respond appropriately to disruptive behavior. *If the group's talking is unproductive or if you feel as if you've lost control of the group, try being silent and looking downward until the group quiets down. Often they will discipline themselves. Don't get into a power struggle. Don't give undo attention to an undesired behavior.*
- ☑ Don't forget to pray! Always keep in mind why we're doing what we're doing.

Tips for Leading Effective Discussions

Discussions are an integral part of youth ministry programming. Young people like being given the chance to express themselves and to seek out the opinions of others. They enjoy insightful and interactive discussions. They dislike being talked down to or having a discussion manipulated toward a pre-determined end.

Good discussions will give young people the opportunity to *think* about a question and *decide* how he or she feels about the topic. By encouraging participation in meaningful discussions, you can help young people to open up, to find expression for those things they long to share, and to help them discover a community that is open to them and their ideas and dreams.

Here are some helpful hints for leading a discussion:

- Be familiar with the subject matter. Take some time in advance to prepare or review the kinds of questions you want to ask.
- Give a brief introduction to the subject matter if it has not already been done. Then ask the group questions, beginning with easy or non-threatening ones. Then move on to the more difficult or specific questions.
- Be sure to address everyone in the group by name. If the participants are not already familiar with one another, be sure they have name tags.
- Ask focused or specific questions. Try to frame your questions in the context of their lives. How something would affect their lives or the lives of their family or friends will elicit much more response than something theoretical or disconnected.
- Encourage the participants of the discussion to ask questions of one another. This will keep from having the focus continually come back to you and maintain the conversational tone of the discussion.
- Explore how the participants *feel* about the topic. This will keep the conversation interesting and meaningful and away from simply reporting the facts.

- Avoid questions that require a simple yes or no for an answer. If yes or no questions are necessary be sure to ask why or why not. The best tactic is to ask open-ended questions such as, “If you had to....,” “What do you think the most effective way....,” “If it were up to you how would you have handled....,” “What do you think or feel about this?”
- Understand and be comfortable with silence. This might seem contradictory to maintaining a good discussion. But there will be times when the participants will fall silent. It is good to know that this happens because they might be taking some time to think about their response. Another reason for silence is they may not have understood what you asked. Be aware and alert to their body-language and facial expressions in order to respond properly. Clarify when necessary.
- Avoid evaluating people’s answers with comments like “good answer,” “nice point,” etc. Help the other participants understand why responses should not be evaluated. This will serve to keep the atmosphere open and objective.
- When you ask questions, be sure to ask in kind and non-confrontational ways so as not to put anyone on the spot.
- Do not take disagreements personally; these are simply opportunities for the group to think about a variety of views on an issue.
- Be orderly and on target. Beware of tangents; people should eventually be able to call the group to task when they stray from the topic or when the group gets too noisy.
- Give everyone a chance to talk, but don’t exhaust the topic. Watch for signs of boredom.
- Throughout the discussion, and particularly at the end, summarize all that has been said, to check whether or not the subject was covered thoroughly and everyone had the opportunity to have their say. A variation on this idea is to ask if there are any participants who would like to summarize.