

## Tips to Train Small Group Bible Study Leaders

by Judy Washburn

Training small group leaders is key to creating a safe learning environment where adults will grow spiritually, emotionally, and relationally through Bible study. Below are some recommendations for equipping small group leaders to bring out the best in every participant.

1. **Define the role of your small group leader.** A small group leader is ideally a *facilitator*, and is the person responsible for leading or coordinating the work of the group, and one who leads the group discussion. The small group leader is *not* the Bible expert, a lecturer, or a therapist. This can be particularly challenging for clergy as they may possess all of those skills, so it is important to explain the role to both leaders and participants.
2. **Set clear goals and boundaries for dialogue.** Group members will work to help a leader achieve balanced sharing when they know this is a goal for the leader. Boundaries for discussion should be named in the guidelines that everyone agrees on. Some guidelines to consider, include keeping the sharing confidential, respecting all ideas, and ensuring everyone has a voice in the group.

Small groups often like to share contact information. That's great as long as everyone understands the information is for the purposes of Bible study group and building friendships, not for sales or marketing purposes.

3. **Share the natural life cycle of small groups with your new leaders.**

Form – Storm – Norm – Perform – Mourn

When leaders know once a group forms there will be storming, which is when dominant personality traits surface and quieter folks retreat, then they can be prepared to graciously lead everyone to a state of balanced sharing. The group will “norm” to the leader's style so modeling is critical as the group performs together to discover the life changing experience of Bible study. Group members may also experience mourning as they disband to re-form, or if someone leaves the group, and a well-informed leader knows to expect the sense of loss and can help the group process the change.

4. **Choose the best study for your situation.** Basically there are two main types of Bible study groups:
  - a. *No advanced reading or homework:* This style of meeting can be meaningful when people are able to quickly focus and close attention is paid to the Biblical text used

in a session. It is helpful to read the text aloud in the session and begin with safe open questions.

- b. *Advanced reading or homework:* This style of meeting can involve any number of types of pre-work including, journaling, sketching, photography, creative writing, and crafting. When expectations are clearly stated, and when the small group session includes what was learned at home, pre-work can help deepen the learning. Check out [Tips to Help the Bible Come Alive for Bible Study Groups](#) by Mary Jane Oliveri to get even more ideas for providing variety in learning tasks.
5. **Read the leader/facilitator guide and be prepared.** The leader/facilitator guide often shares the intent of the author and best practices for using their study guide. When leaders share this intent and their own at the start of a session, participants will more easily understand why they are doing what they are doing. You can only lead as far as you've gone, so do your own lesson!
6. **Know your own learning style.** Bible study leaders, especially pastors, are often good auditory learners and will naturally lean toward lecture and discussion (often called Q&A time). Don't shy away from activities that push you out of your own comfort zone. You don't want to embarrass anyone with activities that would make them uncomfortable, but it is not silly to draw, role play, or sing - so challenge yourself! The important thing is to ensure activities are purposeful and lead to learning.
7. **Allow for silence.** Bible study can sometimes feel like a game show where the first person to respond wins the opportunity to contribute. Allowing for seven seconds of silence on a few questions will level the playing field. Tell your group that you are going to wait for a response, and this will give everyone time to process and share. Inviting people to first take 5 minutes to write down thoughts on their own, can also help enable sharing in the large group. In fact, not all personal reflection and writing even needs to be shared – introverts will appreciate this.
8. **Model simplicity.** It is important to remember that potential *new* leaders are sitting in your Bible study group. They will make the decision to lead or not based in part on what they observe of the current leadership, program and environment. Here are a few tips for keeping it simple:
  - Set up the room with a circle of chairs – keep it simple
  - Start and end on time
  - Keep the leader's prep work to a minimum
  - Offer light and easy refreshments, nothing fancy.

People may enjoy elegant surroundings with fancy foods, guest speakers and stimulating conversation that goes on for hours. However, be careful not to scare

potential leaders off. You don't want potential leaders thinking, "I can't possibly provide a session like this or offer this standard...I should not lead this group."

9. **Lead!** It is the small group leader's responsibility to deal with any issues that cause the group to become unbalanced, including participants who dominate the conversation, inappropriate sharing, or an individual's crisis which could become the "cause" for the group. Deal quickly yet respectfully with problems by reminding the group of the agreed upon guidelines and continually bring them back to the focus of study and the learning tasks.
10. **Contact members outside of the small group setting.** An occasional email, phone call, or conversation outside of your group sessions is a wonderful way to get feedback on how the Bible study is going. It also shows participants you care about them and value their input. The more respect and safety you build in and outside the group sessions, the more deeply and open adult learners will share.

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