

Be a Model of Authenticity

Why group leaders have a critical role in small-group dynamics
Reid Smith

There are several factors that influence the interpersonal dynamics within a small group. One of the most important factors is how real the group leader can be with his or her group members. In fact, the health of a group is almost always linked to how free people feel they can be with one another. And this starts with the leader.

Authenticity is key to success as a small-group leader. It nourishes true community and builds healthy relationships. Here are some practices that will help you model the kind of transparency that will create the best conditions for biblical community to grow.

1. When you ask a personal question, be ready to answer first. It helps to prepare for this by knowing the actual questions in the order you plan to present them during your group's Bible study and discussion time. Here are two rules of thumb to follow:

- *The earlier the better.* Plan to share more personally toward the beginning of your group's discussion time. This will encourage more open communication throughout your time together.
- *Think through your personal responses.* The more prepared you are to answer, the more ready you will be to take risks. So as you review discussion questions before your group's gathering, imagine how you would answer each one honestly.

2. Take things slow and steady. Believe it or not, "planned authenticity" is not an oxymoron. Generally speaking, the more you know people, the more open you can be. It's better to be gradual in a group setting when people don't know each other. For example, baring your soul in the first gathering of a new group might scare some people off. Note the natural progression of Jesus' openness in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). You can be strategic in self-revelation while being led by revelation from the Holy Spirit.

3. Communicate truth and your personal response to it. People like to know what other people think and how they feel in response to something. When you, as the leader, can express both, it invites others to new levels of participation. It's good leadership to tell your group if and why you agree with a biblical principle that's being taught, but you should also share the challenges you face in living out your faith. For example, "It's so important to have a devotional time each day, but there are seasons when I struggle with this. Lately, I've let other things take priority in my life and I want this to change. Please pray for me." Though some might view this as vulnerability that reveals weakness, the opposite is true. Here's what it really shows:

- *A truth.* Spending time with God each day is important to our spiritual growth.
- *You're human.* Nobody is perfect and does what is right all the time.
- *You want what God wants.* Developing your relationship with the Lord is of utmost importance.
- *You need help like everyone else to respond in faith.* We need God and community for life transformation.

4. Grace unlocks authenticity. Grace has a way of drawing out authenticity. More specifically, conversations about God's amazing grace and our dependency on Christ have a way of encouraging authenticity. The more your group's discussion is focused on the person of Jesus Christ, the more willing people will be to tell the truth about who they are and where they're at in their relationship with God and others. Point people to Christ and express how we are all equally in need of grace. Leveling the playing field and equalizing our need for grace releases realness in your group members.

5. Err on the side of risk. It's not unusual to have thoughts that you hesitate to share. In your own mind, ask the Lord to help you discern if there is any reason why you should not share something that might be risky. Your authenticity is most effectively communicated when you put your personal interests aside and take risks for those listening.

6. Share what you really value and love even if you think those around you may not apprehend or accept what you say. We value people who have opinions—as long as they're not pushing them down our throats. Don't be afraid to show where you stand and what you highly value.

7. Don't spin. When you get something wrong, acknowledge it openly and maintain a positive attitude rather than trying to put a positive spin on your mistake. Be real without being hard on yourself. Beating yourself up for getting something wrong raises the stakes for others to share openly. With a smile on your face, simply share what you thought, that you learned differently, and you're glad that you did!

8. Forgiveness nourishes authentic relationships. We don't hold onto grudges; they hold onto us. Grudges and unwillingness to forgive others—whether they're part of our small group or not—erect barriers in relationships and make authenticity more difficult. In other words, a lack of forgiveness will produce a lack of authenticity. It is imperative for us to be right with people if we want to be real with others.

10. Employ the "Socratic Virtues" in your group facilitation. These would include the following:

- *Listening.* When people feel like they're being heard, they want to share.
- *Patience.* People who tend to be shy will need more time to open up. When they experience love expressed as patience, they will participate—in time. It is worth the wait because, when these people open up, it can be the tipping point in your group dynamic and take everyone to a new depth of authenticity.
- *Perseverance.* Like patience, perseverance is an expression of love. When people know you'll go the distance with them, they'll go deeper in dialogue.
- *Trusting one's doubts.* If you feel like you're holding back in what you're sharing, prayerfully discern if it's something God wants you to tell others, and go with your gut. If it seems like something is missing in what another person is sharing, carefully weigh if you should call it out in the group by asking questions or if you should talk with the person outside the group; either action can help to build authenticity.
- *Talking frankly.* People believe you're being real when you talk frankly with them. Honest input from the heart of a person you know cares about you is a treasure that transforms the relationship. Sharing without hesitation or fear removes any barriers that can prevent authenticity.
- *Postponing one's judgment.* Always be an advocate for the people who share, especially when they're being transparent. This doesn't mean you're always for their point of view, but that you are always for them. Give people time to share their heart and don't be quick to draw conclusions. People will not feel safe enough to share their heart if they feel rushed or judged. You want to really hear them so you can understand their heart.
- *Be willing to revise your opinion and respect other points of view.* Your willingness to change your opinion demonstrates a flexibility and openness in your communication style, which invites people into discussion. Most people do not enjoy debating and arguing points and opinion. They enjoy talking with somebody who respects the insights of others and really listens to them.

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