

Four Keys to Transformational Discussions

Create an environment for life change with these simple tips.
Dr. Bill Donahue

Group discussions can be the most intimidating part of any meeting, even for the most seasoned leader. Put a dozen people in a room, each with their own passions, opinions, interpretations, and points of view, throw a Bible verse into the mix, and just about anything can happen. It takes a skilled leader to guide the process, ask compelling questions, follow the movement of the Spirit, and steer clear of some deadly discussion killers. How do great leaders initiate and navigate transformational discussions?

Use Discussion Starters

Personal stories, lifestyle anecdotes, current issues, fun [icebreakers](#), and simple reflection exercises can loosen up a group or focus the conversation on the heart of the discussion. The easiest way to get everyone talking is tapping into personal experiences. We're all experts in our own past, opinions, and points of view, so ask group members about themselves:

Sarah, you mentioned a way you experienced God this week. I wonder if we could all check in in a similar fashion. Feel free to be as brief as you'd like, and complete this thought: "In view of the week I've had—or am having—I am so glad God is _____." Here is a short list of God's actions and attributes to help if you need it: holy, forgiving, kind, creative, just, a friend, teacher, my guide, or protector.

A quick anecdote by you as leader can set the tone, especially for newcomers who might be wondering, "How deep am I expected to share?" You can get the conversation going and set the level of vulnerability or disclosure that you know is easy for everyone to mirror as they jump in.

Navigate the "Truth-Life" Tension

Group discussions tend to move along the "truth-life" continuum. This is often reflective of the kind of group and the leader's personal style. Content-focused discussion groups lean more heavily toward the "truth" end of the spectrum, striving for meaning of the text, one's understanding of God, or unpacking the issue or theme on the table.

On the "life" end of the continuum, the conversation focuses on me, my situation, my prayer needs, and my personal spiritual condition. Prayer and share groups, topical discussion groups, and practical groups (like groups on parenting, men's issues, or women in the marketplace) tend to lean this way.

The challenge of the small-group leader is to avoid too much of a good thing. Too much life focus can take our eyes off God's perspective. Too much truth focus can leave people with a range of principles to ponder but little understanding of how these truths get infused into their 24/7 life full of relationships, work, and spiritual progress.

It's okay to lean one way or the other for a season, but a good leader will nudge the conversation so that both truth and life are held together. This is where growth is maximized.

The goal is not to stay in perfect balance between the two ends, but rather to be aware of movement along the continuum. Take time to examine whether a series of meetings or discussions is camping out too long on one end. We want truth to move toward life practice, and life stories and needs to be shaped by truth.

Parker Palmer, in his book *To Know as We are Known*, captures this tension in his definition of teaching: “To teach is to create a space where obedience to truth can be practiced.” Sounds very much like Jesus’ injunction to “teach them to obey all that I commanded...” in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19). He did not say, “*Tell* them to obey” nor “teach them all I have *commanded*” but rather “teach them to *obey*” which calls for the practice of the truth, not simply the discussion of truth.

Leverage the Power of Questions

Questions create a powerful learning environment. They encourage people to tell their stories and establish a safe, relaxing conversational tone. When we talk too much or become too directive during a discussion, people lose the benefits of self-discovery and deeper learning that are the hallmarks of group interaction. It might take longer than simply telling them the truth, but when we do that, the learning process is thwarted.

Here are some common kinds of questions that can help:

Closed Questions

Closed questions are questions of fact and are right or wrong. “Where was Jesus when he raised Lazarus from the dead?” Answer: “Bethany.” End of discussion. Closed questions are necessary to establish some basic truths and verify that everyone is on the same page. For example, “What two things does this passage say about faith?” is an important question for clarity, but will likely generate little discussion.

Open Questions

By contrast, open questions invite conversation, opinions, and dialogue. Read Luke 9:18: “Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say I am?’ ”

Read the rest of the passage and you’ll see this invited a variety of responses from those around Jesus. In general, open questions make everyone feel like an expert because we’re asking about their opinion or point of view.

A question like, “When Jesus says, ‘Love your enemies’ what comes immediately to your mind?” doesn’t have one correct answer. Another example is: “If Christians were really known by our love for one another, how might that create opportunities to connect with our neighbors?” That question may even prompt some action.

Guiding Questions

Transformational discussions move to a deeper level when we use guiding questions that invite people to look at their hearts and weigh how they will pursue life change by putting truth into action, changing a behavior, or dealing with a destructive pattern. Open questions open hearts and get discussion going, but guiding questions move the discussion deeper.

In response to a conflict situation shared by a group member, for example, you might say: “What would it look like, Kevin, if you asked her to meet and discuss the problem over a cup of coffee?” Or you might go deeper about the whole group by asking, “That’s a great thought, Rachel, and it prompts a question. How might our group look if we each begin to live the way of life you just described?”

Probing Questions

These questions not only seek further insight and understanding, but often challenge people's assumptions or beliefs. Probing is not passing judgment or creating unnecessary tension just for tension's sake. It's motivated by the desire to help group members look deeply at themselves or their situation when they seem to be avoiding reality or excusing actions they already know are required. Probing seeks greater understanding so we can love people, but also so we can "spur one another on to love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24). Here are two examples:

- Dave, what does, "I'll deal with that later when I have more time" really mean? How much later?
- Do you sense that, as a group, we're growing in compassion toward one another? If not, what is standing in the way?

Clarifying Questions

These questions help members understand what has been said and sometimes reveal contradictions in people's statements or thinking. Often they begin with, "Help me understand," but they also look like these examples:

- You said you like this guy. But a minute ago you said he sometimes "really scares" you. That sounds like a contradiction to me: liking someone who really scares you.
- I confess I feel a little off track. Where are we headed in this discussion right now? It seems like there are several issues all floating around in the conversation.

Transformation is always the work of the Spirit, but leaders have been given the responsibility to create environments for the Spirit to work. We are stewards of the truth, of the process, and of the people, shepherding and guiding them along the path as we're able. Using these questions as tools is not just a group dynamics technique—it's a way to practically guide a discussion as we sense the Spirit moving in our group. And we model this kind of questions-asking so that others soon do the same with one another.

Avoid Common Discussion Killers

Finally, there are comments and behaviors that can shut down a productive discussion in a heartbeat. As the leader, you'll need to put a stop to them. Here are four biggies to look out for.

Judging

Snap judgments and misplaced assumptions about people or reality are inappropriate:

You've got to be kidding, Mike! I would never do that with my kid. Don't you care about his future?

This kind of content is less about an issue and more of an attack against a person. You have to separate the issue from the person. As Henry Cloud often says, "Be hard on the issue, soft on the person."

If Mike can't push back appropriately, feels attacked, and shuts down, you might have to intervene and model a better response:

Wait a minute, Jim. Let's not jump all over Mike. That sounded personal more than simply disagreement with an idea. Mike, tell us a little more about your thinking behind this approach, and why it's important to you. And, if you're open, perhaps we can each talk about different ways we handle this kind of thing. But let's stay on the issue. We all want to raise our kids as best we can, despite different approaches and ideas.

Preaching

The “preachers” in your group are quick to tell everyone how they should be acting. They jump right in and start fixing things. Susan shares about how difficult it is to work with a fellow employee who can be rude and disruptive on her team. Cassandra immediately begins to preach: “Susan, you need to read a great book called, *Handling Difficult Team Members at Work*. It really helped me. There are five ideas there you just have to use. It’ll show you how to shut that guy down. I remember when I . . .”

Instead of first seeking to understand Susan's situation and empathize with her frustrations, our preacher has already jumped in with a sermon on what to do. Once again, you might have to intervene and suggest the group pauses and connects with Susan before offering solutions.

Summarizing

“Well, it seems like we all agree so let’s move on,” remarks a summarizer. These folks often complete people’s sentences or ideas, and eagerly—often impatiently—stifle deeper discussion by offering simple or superficial comments as the final conclusion. They think, *Haven’t we been over this territory already? I thought we decided this!* They are apt to reach conclusions too quickly and cut off participation, especially from quieter members who need time to reflect and process.

Spiritualizing

I confess this one bugs me the most. To a challenging issue or complex personal problem the spiritualizer may say, “Let’s just remember the blood of Jesus and know that all things will work together for good. We need to simply trust and obey!”

Such comments may include legitimate spiritual truths in them, but are often used to avoid painful realities, ignore the complexity of a situation, or medicate one’s own ambiguity or discomfort with the direction of the discussion. It might be appropriate to acknowledge after such a comment that, indeed, God is at work and we certainly can trust him, but we also need to listen to the details and explore ways we can support this group member through prayer, practical help, and other resources.

The Effort Is Worth It!

It will take you some time to learn these keys and experiment with them. The main idea is to realize you have a variety of tools in your leadership toolkit for guiding discussions that are biblically sound, relationally engaging, and lead to true transformation. Good starters, artful questions, balance between life and truth, and awareness of discussion killers will help you lead life-changing discussions.

Lead on and lead well!

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