MANAGING GROUP DYNAMICS

Group dynamics is a critical part of any small group. Healthy dynamics provide safety and space for people to engage and learn from each other. The life of the group will depend upon how well the group learns to interact with each other and honor their time together. In order to keep a group moving in the right direction, a leader will need discern when issues arise that need to be addressed and corrected. Here are a list of 11 different situations within a group that may occur and some possible solutions that can be used to resolve these issues.

Issue #1 The Overly Talkative Member

Sometimes you will have members of your group who will dominate the group discussion. They may talk excessively about themselves, tell very detailed stories, or even take the discussion in a very different direction than the one you planned. In effect, they will control the tenor and agenda of your group. How do you see yourself handling this situation for the good of the group?

There are many techniques you can use with participants who are long winded and monopolize the group.

Possible Solutions:

- Learn to shift the conversation to another participant when the talker takes a breath.
- Use a pen, pencil, egg timer, etc. to physically show “who has the floor.”
- Because some people may be new or been absent during this discussion, it might be a good thing to repeat the “ground rules” of the group.
- Talk to the person after the group:
  1. Ask them, “Were you clear the first night regarding the three-minute talking rule?”
  2. You may need to repeat the “ground rules.”
- Talk to the whole group about being sensitive to the needs of others to share in the group.

Issue #2 The Silent Person

Compared to the excessive talker, the silent person may seem like a blessing to some leaders, yet silent people also have needs, which can be met in the group. Silent people may be resistant or shy. Because of their background, they may feel like they have nothing worthwhile to say. They may fear looking foolish or being rejected. Whatever the case, they use silence as a means of withdrawing from the group. How would you handle this situation?

Possible Solutions:

- Do not pressure anyone to contribute or criticize them for their silence. Instead, encourage the participant by listening to, appreciating, and affirming their comments.
- Bring them into the conversation by saying something like... “So (person’s name), what do you think?
- Take them aside and ask if they are comfortable with the group and their own silence.
**Issue #3  No One Will Talk**

Sometimes the entire group seems subdued and unresponsive. There may be many reasons for this emotional lethargy or blockage. Perhaps the trust level has not developed in the group. People may fear that what is shared will be disclosed outside the meeting. Maybe everyone has had a hard day and just wants to listen. How would you handle this situation?

**Possible Solutions:**
- There is both productive and nonproductive silence in a group:
  - Productive silence occurs when members are internally processing something that was said or done in the group.
  - Nonproductive silence occurs when members are quiet because they are confused, fearful, or bored. If you as the leader have determined it is nonproductive silence, you might ask the group why they are so quiet, rephrase the question, or move on to another question.
- Offer to share your thoughts first as a way to help them engage. (but don’t make this a habit)
- Sit quietly and smile and wait for someone to respond. Sooner or later someone will gain the courage to take the initiative. Silence may be healthy as people discover that you are willing to wait for them to share.
- If after waiting a long period for someone to share (2-3 minutes) address the lack of conversation directly. Inquire as to why the group does not wish to talk. Point out that the purpose for your time together is to engage in conversation and inquire into why they don’t feel comfortable talking.

**Issue #4  The Negative/Argumentative Group Member**

A negative member is one who constantly complains about the group or disagrees with other members of the group. Negative members are particularly troublesome because their attitude and behavior run counter to the leader’s goal of maintaining a positive working tone. If one or two members are negative and begin to complain, other members will sometimes join in and also become negative. The result is that the group becomes a gripe session and very little is accomplished.

**Possible Solutions:**
- Talk to the person outside the group and attempt to establish why they are so negative. Ask the person, “Did I say something that offended you?” Be ready for the response.
- Ask for the group’s cooperation and help in making the group productive.
- Identify the positive members in your group and direct your questions to them.
- The biggest mistake is to confront the negative person in front of the other group members. If they are already argumentative this will set them off and create an unsafe environment for the others. It shows sensitivity and respect to speak to that person one-on-one. The people in your group need to feel safe; we are trying to help them learn to deal with conflict in a biblical manner.
- Ask the group as a whole to maintain a positive approach to the discussions. Offer to pray about it. Acknowledge and validate what they feel.
- If the person has been privately asked to refrain from negative and argumentative conversations and continues to do so, address this publicly with the whole group present and have the group share how it makes them feel when this happens.
- After several efforts to control this issue privately and publicly, ask the individual to leave the group until they can maintain a more positive posture in the group. Encourage them to get counseling.
Issue #5  Dealing with Conflict in Your Group

There are bound to be conflicts with participants in your group. Many of them have never learned how to resolve conflicts in a healthy and loving way. If conflicts arise in your group, what are some healthy ways of helping your participants resolve those conflicts?

Possible Solutions:
- Introduce Matthew 18:15-17 to your group early on in the group process. Discuss in detail how this looks to “speak the truth in love.”
- Teach “I” statements: “I feel hurt when...”
  - Remind participants to refrain from disrespecting others. (group members, family members, etc.)
- When you go to confront someone, always own your part first. (Logs VS specks. Matthew 7:3-5)

Issue #6  Superficial Sharing

There may be some individuals who have never experienced deep authentic conversations or are afraid to share intimately and honestly. This may be a result of past experiences, poor leadership, or someone else is impeding the progress of the group member’s bonding. How would you handle this situation?

Possible Solutions:
- Model this yourself. If you want people to share deeply and openly, then you must also. Take care however, that the group time does not become all about you. Keep your sharing to a minimum.
- Work on your questioning technique as a leader. Your questions may be too close-ended (“yes” or “no” answers). Ask open-ended or feeling questions such as: “What concerns you about this?” “How do you imagine this will impact your life?” “Describe to me what you are afraid will happen.”
- Restate or rephrase what you have heard them say and ask them to “say more.”
- Describe safety and boundaries and how we need to be aware of not violating one another. This may be why someone in your group may not be sharing.

Issue #7  Not sticking to the Topic/The Distracter/Cross talk

The distracter is a member who is either seeking attention or trying to avoid dealing with their own issues. To accomplish this, the group member may try to get the group off task by bringing up unrelated subjects or asking questions that are not relevant. Some distracters make noises or move around as a way to distract themselves and others.

Possible Solutions:
- Avoid inviting your group on a “rabbit trail” in the first place. This happens when you ask them questions like, “Tell me how your week went.” This can turn into a complaint session and is detrimental to the growth of the group. Venting and working to make application to their lives from the group’s teaching or other productive questions are two different things.
- Try talking with this group member privately and then ignoring their disruptive comments or behaviors during the group time. This will help to minimize the effects of the distraction.
- Redirect the discussion back to the application questions
- Thank them for sharing. Pray for them. Deal with the person later.
- Repeat offenders who have been dealt with privately can be directly addressed in group time. Model appropriate confrontational skills as you address the issue publicly yet lovingly.
Issue #8  The Rescuing Member
Rescuing is the attempt of a member to smooth over negative feelings experienced by another member of the group. This is usually not helpful and such comments often sound patronizing (“Now don’t worry; it will be all right.”) The negative effect of rescuing is that it prevents the member from processing their feelings and problem solving. Your job is to teach your group members how to help through sharing (care giving) rather than rescuing (care taking). How would you handle this situation?

Possible Solutions:
- The facilitator might need to gently interrupt if this is happening on a regular basis.
- You might want to discuss with the group the differences between helping, sharing and rescuing.

Issue #9  Especially Wounded Participants
People in groups come in with all kinds of life issues. Wounded people have often denied their painful feelings for so long that starting to look at their pain will cause tears and pain to be released during the group time. While crying and expressing feelings is encouraged, it is important to continue with the group. How would you handle this situation?

Possible Solutions:
- Always have a packet of tissues for your group.
- If you see a group member tear up or cry, do not try to stop the emotion because it makes you or others uncomfortable. Tears are appropriate. The only words you need to say are, “It’s OK to cry here; God gave us tear ducts for a purpose.” Allow the person to “pace themselves” in regards to the painful emotions. Do not try to force their process.
- Even with people expressing deep pain, the leader has to walk a delicate balance between allowing the person to express their pain and modeling safety in the group for others in the future, but not at the rest of the group’s expense. While you may decide to spend a little extra time with one person, it is still your role to make sure others are heard.
- If the wounded individual begins to monopolize every group time with their hurt and pain, address it with them privately and let them know that though the group is here to support them and cares about them, this is not a counseling group and they may need additional support that the group cannot provide for them. Allow them to stay within your group (provided they agree to try and not monopolize the group time) for community and support but encourage them to seek additional support for their issue (care group or counseling).
Issue #10  Inheriting An Established Group
This occurs when a leader leaves a group and a new leader steps in, or when two groups combine after one leader leaves. As the leader, you are one of the new people. You may pick up some tension, fear and anxiety from some of your participants. How would you handle this situation?

Possible Solutions:
- Acknowledge up front that this transition can cause some people to feel left out or awkward. Tell the entire group that it is your hope that everyone will be sensitive to this and that the members have much to offer in the way of support and encouragement to the new group members.
- Let them know that while your leadership style may be different from their previous leader’s, it is your desire for everyone in the group to learn something each other—not just you.
- Create some activities and exercises that allow the group members to get to know you and the other members of the group.
- Honor past practices within the group and establish new traditions as well.

Issue #11  Romance: Too Close Too Soon
Two members of your group may develop strong feelings for one another and it is suspected that they have started a romantic (or dating) relationship with each other. How would you handle this situation?

Possible Solutions:
- If you feel led, you might consider meeting with the couple in private and without being controlling or judgmental, share with them the importance of honoring each other and the group. They need to be sensitive to the others in the group who may feel awkward about their dating.
- If the couple are Christians, talk to them about biblical principles regarding sexual purity, adultery and being unevenly yoked (in layman’s terms) outside the group time.
- If it is clear that the only reason a person joined the group was to find a mate, a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” may be asked to leave. Consult with your Area Leader about the issue.

If you are struggling to resolve any of these issues, consult with your Area Leader and ask them to sit in the group with you to observe and offer suggestions.