

Practical Solutions to Common Small Group Dilemmas

See also [*Leading an Effective Discussion*](#)

The Quiet Ones

Two things could be going on:

- They are naturally quiet and need time to ponder an idea. They do not want to say anything that is silly or unimportant.
- The rest of the group is dominating the conversation and they can't find a place to break in.

Solutions:

- Involve them in a non- "spotlight's-on-you" manner. For example, bring treats, come early to help set up, or stay after to help clean up.
- After asking a question, pause and look several people in the eye. About 50% of the time, call on someone to answer. But always give people time to think by asking the question before you call on them. For example: Don't say "Bob, what is your favorite book of the Bible?" Instead say, "What is your favorite book of the Bible? (Pause. Look several people in the eye.) ...Bob?"
- Give them fair warning that they will have to give an answer. For example, after you ask a question say: "I would like to hear from everyone on this one." or "Let's go around the circle and tell what impacted you in this passage."
- Start the discussion by calling on someone other than the quiet people, unless they indicate they are ready to answer.
- After one or two people have already answered a question, and there's more that could be added, ask one of the quiet ones, "What do you think, Kara?" or "What would you like to add?"
- Be attentive to their body language. Catching your eye or leaning forward may be signals that a person has something to say.
- Affirm them authentically. For example, "That's a good point." You could also privately encourage their participation by making statements such as, "I thought what you said about God's faithfulness was so wise. Tell me how you came to that thought."
- Spend time with them outside of the group in one-on-one situations or make a point to visit with them at events. The more comfortable, safe, and valued quiet people feel with the group members, the easier it will be for them to interact in the group as a whole.
- Remember to sometimes allow people the privilege of being silent.

The Monopolizers or Over-talkers

Monopolizers are often natural leaders. Appreciate their enthusiasm and involvement. At least the entire group is not consistently staring at you with blank looks and answering questions with the dreaded “I don’t know.”

- Don’t ignore the problem and let them rule the group. You are the leader for a reason.
- Don’t “put them in their place” or otherwise embarrass them by correcting them strongly in public. You are a facilitator not a dictator.
- Don’t avoid confronting. You are a discipler, teaching and training them to do God’s work better. Love them enough to help them change.

Solutions:

- Give them a job. Often the talkative ones are those who love to jump in, help when needed, or lead when given a chance. Ask them to open in prayer, lead worship, or bring a story or quote about the topic you’re going to discuss.
- Put a time limit on responses by stating, “So that everyone has a chance to share, take 3 minutes or less to tell us a highlight of Christmas break.” Stick to it. If necessary, assign someone (the monopolizer, maybe) stopwatch duty.
- Make a rule that everyone has the opportunity to contribute once before anyone responds a second time to the same question.
- When a monopolizer takes a breath, interrupt with an affirming comment, and redirect the question. For example: “That is helpful, Joe. What’s do you think, Shawn?” or “Good point, Alice. Now what do the rest of you think about ... (restate the question)?”
- If it becomes a consistent problem for 3 weeks or so, talk privately to them. They are probably unaware they are over-talking and would rather know how to improve. Sandwich the issue you are addressing with sincere affirmation. For example, “Will, I so appreciate your helpful contributions to our discussions. I love your enthusiasm! Not everyone in the group has the same confidence you have in their ability to articulate their thoughts. I was wondering if you could help me draw them out by holding off answering the questions until one or two people speak? I want you to know that your input is much needed and it encourages others to participate in the discussion.”
- Stronger correction may be needed, but be sure to always speak in love, keeping in mind your own weaknesses. Come to them in love for the good of the group. Come to them as well for their godly character development and successful people skills at work and socially.

The Argumentative Ones

Argumentative people may place a high value on people believing what is right and true. However they come across as if they are right and others are wrong. They tend to disagree frequently, look for exceptions, and come across as combative and wanting to “win.” They may communicate disapproval of the values, actions, or feelings of others. They may make sarcastic, demeaning, or humiliating comments or jokes.

- As with the monopolizer, don't ignore the problem and let them undermine the culture of safety and openness you are trying to facilitate in the group. Don't avoid correcting them or encouraging them to express their perspectives in more considerate ways.

Solutions:

- Always remember: *A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1*
- Validate or find some merit in their points, and redirect the question to others. For example, “I can see you feel strongly about that issue.” Or, “I have not thought of it that way. What do the rest of you think?”
- Offer a place or opportunity where they can be heard by asking, “Can we talk more about this in our one-on-one on Monday?” Then redirect your question to others, or ask a new question and call on someone. This approach keeps the group safe for all members and validates the person with the issue.
- Follow up with the argumentative person privately. Sometimes expressed anger or frustration is a sign that God is pressing on an issue in need of character development or healing.
- Using specific examples, talk to them in private about the effect their actions have on you or on the group. For example, “I do appreciate your zeal for truth, Dave. When you spoke to Fred about the baptism with the Holy Spirit, your tone seemed antagonistic to me. Sound doctrine is very important—we don't want to sacrifice relationship by the way we talk about it.”
- If you must disagree, speak kindly and with an even tone. For example: “I don't think we see things the same way.”
- If, after speaking to them privately they continue to argue or make personal attacks, it may be necessary to kindly and firmly address the behavior in the meeting. “We have spoken privately about the arguing (or the specific behavior). When you do this, it's hard to feel safe to express a different perspective. How would you like us as a group to help you contribute to a safer group experience?”