

Leading Group Discussions

Teacher Tips by Joey Schwartz

One of the most challenging tasks for teachers is guiding a group into appropriate, practical discussion. You might arrive with a set of planned questions—but what do you do when a group member derails the plan with a drawn-out personal story or a rabbit-hole topic?

When I first started leading Bible studies, I discovered that some of my leadership habits held the group back from its full potential. For example, I would ask intricate “Bible trivia” questions that sometimes discouraged newcomers. Or I would fill every bit of silence with additional commentary and rephrased questions, thus preventing the participation of other voices. No wonder the young men stopped speaking up! Over time, I learned a few simple rules to guide discussion. While these guardrails don’t guarantee success, they *can* keep us from unwittingly steering our groups into dry or ineffective conversation.

Guardrail #1: Embrace the Silence

James was speaking wisely when he wrote, “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak . . .” (James 1:19). Ask yourself: *Are you swift to speak? Or swift to listen?*

Because it is uncomfortable when no one answers a question immediately, it is tempting to jump in and break what may feel like awkward silence. But the truth is that in the silence, God is doing His best work. He is stirring up minds and softening hearts as the members of your group process the question, chew on it, and prepare their answers. If you have trouble allowing for silence, consider using the “Fifteen Second Rule.” After you ask a question, count to fifteen in your head before you say anything else. This practice cultivates the expectation that there will be ample space to process queries and contribute thoughtfully to the conversation.

Guardrail #2: Stir Up Mind and Heart

One of my favorite verses about asking good

questions is Proverbs 20:5: “Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” Inside every member of your group, there is a deep sea of hopes and dreams, concerns and worries, gifts and ideas. A wise leader will draw those out with questions and reflective space.

It is good practice to avoid “yes/no” or fact-based questions, as they can tighten the room and close down conversation. Instead, offer broad, open-ended questions that expand participants’ imaginations and allow for free-flowing speech. Swap a fact-based question like, “What did Jesus say to the disciples when He came into the room?” (John 20:19) for an open-ended question like, “In what part of your life do you need Jesus to speak peace?” Both types of questions encourage group members to search. But fact-based questions push them to grasp the “right answer,” whereas open-ended questions allow for wonder and variation.

Guardrail #3: Follow the Plan— Until God Shows You a Better One

As leaders, we’ve all had our share of times when a meeting goes off the rails. It only takes one member of the group to veer into an unhelpful topic and sabotage what would otherwise be an engaging discussion. In those cases, the best practice is to reel in the conversation with a gracious, focused question.

But have you ever had your plan go off course *for good*? For example, someone in your group opens up about difficulties in their family, another member asks for prayer over a burden, or someone is convicted by God’s Word and wants to confess their sins.

In these moments, it is good to remember Proverbs 19:21: “There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless, the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.” Remember, the ultimate goal is not sticking to your plan; it is to make room for the transformative power of God. If God opens up a different route, take it with joy.