

DiscussIt!

Principles about how to kick start a great discussion group

By Bill Cearbaugh

Many thanks to my family. They have patiently listened to me talk about these principles many times...may you taste and see the favor and blessing of our God!

Here are some notes about principles I've learned over the years on how to lead a discussion group. I trust you will find something new that strikes your fancy and it will help you.

First and foremost to leading a successful discussion group, whether it is at work, your church, or for a non-profit org you are volunteering for, is developing trust among those in the group. How do you in the shortest time period possible develop such trust and why do I start here on this topic? In any discussion group, a member of the group, when they share are giving out a "piece of themselves". What do I mean by this? They are sharing values, principles, ideas they hold dear to themselves. When giving out such information, people do not do this quickly with just any person. The members need to know that those they are sharing with can be trusted with this treasured commodity; my ideas. When the members of the group know that they are secure with others in the group, they will tend to reveal more freely what's "inside" with those around them. Until this bridge is crossed, you will find your group clamming up or only talking when asked to talk or by forcing everyone to talk by going around the group one by one.

So how does a group leader create an environment like this where everyone is willing to trust one another, and thus willing to open up and share themselves with others in the group? First start with events that are informal and fun. Informal and fun opportunities break the ice and help group members let their hair down. They also are great ways to let the group get to know one another. As they get to know one another better, they will soon understand either consciously or sub-consciously that it is alright to express themselves openly with others in the group.

It is also super to interact with the group in smaller groups. For example, you

may want to invite a couple of the people in the group to lunch or spend time at a local activity with a couple other members. I think you get the idea. Socially you are mixing it up, and when you do this, you are letting everyone informally get to know each other better. Or you may want to ask people in your group to occasionally bring refreshments and set aside some of your group's time just eating refreshments and letting everyone mix socially. The bottom line in all of this is- help everyone get to know each other better. The better they know one another, the better they will interact as a team or a group.

Trust is not easy to create among a discussion group, but it is the key that will unlock your group and allow you to see people begin talking spontaneously without constantly being prompted to do so.

OK, you have everyone trusting each other, what in the world do you do with this group of talkers? Now you feel like you have a bunch of random A.D.D. talkers who are willing to talk about anything, but you, as a leader can't seem to guide this ship in the direction you want them to head. This is where the fun really begins for you. If you get to this point, the hard part is over. It's just a matter of directing them with gentle leading questions that guide them through the topic of the night/day. Even though your hard work is over, preparation for the leader is critical. A well prepared leader will be able to use his/her notes, but relaxed enough to "go with the flow". But you say, "How do I prepare? Where do I even begin?" You begin by preparing questions, well in advance that lead the group inductively to the conclusions you want them to have. Here is a simple outline for you:

Observations
Interpretations
Correlations
Applications

(To remember these, I use the mnemonic device: OICA)

Observation

These are simple questions that seem very obvious to the group. Let's say you are in a meeting of people that are discussing the preparations necessary in case of a disaster. Your obvious observation question would be...What kinds of things could we be doing to prepare well for this kind of disaster? I realize

this seems obvious, but it gets the group headed in the right direction, it gets them thinking, and it gets them talking. Once several have answered your question, then go to the next type of question, interpretation.

Interpretation

Questions which draw out an interpretation are typically going to begin with a "Why" question. So taking their responses to the observation question, you draw them out to the next level and make them think about an interpretation. For example, using the above observations, you might ask a question like...Why do you feel we need to make these preparations? Now the group has to think even harder and come up with reasons to back up their previous statements.

Correlation

You have everyone interacting about why they feel/think the way they do, now you want to get them looking at the big picture. i.e. Again using the above topic..."In light of all our comments, why do we need to be prepared? Wouldn't it be better to just let things happen naturally, so we don't waste our resources? How does preparation fit into the greater scheme of things?" Here we have stepped it up a notch again and made them think in even broader terms of why we are doing what we are doing and more so, why we value this activity so much.

Application

Everyone by now is developing a stronger conviction that these activities are important. Words sometimes can be cheap....but action will be a manifestation that these newly developed convictions are real. So direct the group by asking, "Based on everything we talked about today, what one or two things would you like to do to make a change? Take a couple minutes to write them down and we will share them with each other."

If you use this formula over and over- O I C A, you will succeed in seeing the group led in the right direction. Keep in mind, I used an everyday topic, you can use these same principles for a book reading group, a class at your church, or your local city development team. They will work no matter what the context is. Next let's talk about redirecting questions; questions that allow you to hold the reins to the group and naturally guide the group in the direction you want them to go.

Redirection Questions

Here is where many group leaders drop the ball; not using redirection questions. By redirection questions, I am referring to questions that keep the group on task and focused on the topics you want them to talk about. Below I will list several and give you examples of how to use them. The redirection questions need to be integrated into the OICA questions, so you end up with the desired outcome. Let me go ahead and tell you about them, how to use them with OICA questions, and then I think this will all make more sense to you.

One of the most difficult problems in a group to handle is the person in the group that wants to dominate the discussion. How do we tactfully get them to share the discussion with the rest of the group and not realize that you are doing this? You design several redirection questions which will open the discussion to the rest of the group and by design not allow the dominate talker to answer the redirection question. Here is what I mean. Let's say you have a group that is talking together pretty well, but Suzie insists on not letting anyone else talk. Just use a simple question like this, whenever she takes a pause: "How about the rest of you, do you agree with Suzie and why?" This obviously excludes Suzie from answering because you have directed the question to everyone but her, but you are doing it tactfully, you are respecting her comments by asking everyone else to offer feedback about her comments.

Or maybe you have a group that is still fairly new and one or two people have shared, but everyone is reluctant to say anything. My last choice would be to direct the question to a specific person, but occasionally I will do that to keep everyone on their toes. That is the exception, not the rule. Another question you can use is similar to the above question used for a dominate talker, but slightly different. You might ask, "Would anyone else like to add to Ed's comment?" or "How about the rest of you, what do you think?" or "Who else has something to add to his comment?" You want at this point to not be the person answering your own questions. You want to redirect the discussion back to the group. After a few times getting together, they will realize that you are not going to answer your own questions, and they will end up doing most of the talking. Here is why I prefaced the redirection section the way I did. So often a group leader's intentions are to lead a discussion. However once he/she starts asking questions, no one will answer them, so he answers his own questions. From that point on the gathering becomes a lecture and not a discussion. And every class, or group gathering ends up being a

teaching/lecturing session, not a discussion, because the leader is now intimidated, he is completely unable to get anyone to talk. What I often do to circumvent this from happening is to simply tell the group at the beginning of the session, "I am not going to answer my own questions. This is a discussion time and if you do not talk and respond, we are going to have a very quiet time together." Everyone often nervously laughs, but when I let silence continue after my first or second question, they quickly discern that I meant what I said, I came to lead a discussion and would love to hear the group's comments.

Here is a good one, what about the distractor that gets everyone talking about a topic where you did not want to go as a group. What do we do in this kind of situation? First of all do not sit on the person's comments, let them talk, it provides variety and as they say, "Variety is the spice of life", it allows the group to see that you value everyone's comments and they will tend to want to participate more. But at some point, reiterate your original question by saying something like this: "Thank you Randy for the insight, let's get back to my question, (Then you simply restate your question.)...???" You want to be flexible, but at some point to accomplish your goals for the group, you want to redirect everyone back on task, it takes some tactful balance and all in the group will see you are being patient, but focused.

Fun

BTW, Did I mention fun? Let me interject a comment here. Because I am such a detailed person, reading this you might think, yuk, this sounds boring and intense. That is only because I want to communicate a lot of information in a short period of time. The truth is, if you know these principles well and practice them, you can be very free to also have a lot of fun and excitement within the group. You as a leader need to set the tone of the group. If you come across intense and sober, everyone else will follow suite. Lighten up and do have some fun. It is in the fun and mixing it up that people will feel even more free to share. They won't feel everyone is evaluating their every word. It's in the feeling safe that the group members will open up, relax and start kidding and joking with one another. If you enjoy yourself, so will the group members. Smile, take a deep breathe, and look for ways to have spontaneous fun, it will make a group that people will want to come back to and impart their significant thoughts. And oh BTW, sometimes for fun tell everyone they have to get rid of their watches. Put them in pockets, purses, wherever, but for the rest of the discussion, they need to forget about time. The time OCD's

in the group will loosen up and share more spontaneously.... you might be surprised to see more people share too.

More Redirection

Let me not bore you with more examples of redirection questions, but rather I will sum up this section by giving you some perspective. You can make a list of redirection questions for yourself, apart from the OICA questions. Start your study with your prepared OICA questions and then when necessary grab from your redirection bag a question to help your group stay on track. Group leaders who know where they are headed will always keep the end goal in mind. It will be your redirection questions that will be the "steering wheel" for your group. Don't start your discussion car without your hands around 10 and 2 on your wheel. It will keep you from having a terrible discussion crash!

Summarizing the Discussion

There are several ways to summarize a discussion and you should use a variety of ways to keep the group's interest, especially if you are meeting two or more times a month with the group. One way I enjoy concluding a discussion is to first throw out some final application questions. I am a very practical person, so if this discussion is going to turn talk into action and action into productivity, then you need to help the group conclude with what they are going to do about all this talk. For example, you might ask a question like - In light of all our discussion today, what one area do you feel you need to change or we as a group need to change this week? Once everyone that wants to share has a chance to talk, you then might consider a summary question like - How would you summarize our discussion in one or two sentences? This forces the group to boil down all the chatter into a few words, which in turn makes them pick the essential issues. Don't put yourself in the teacher mode right now. It is a great temptation to do this at the end. If you let the group summarize, you will truly discover if you have done your job or not. The proof is in the pudding...have they on their own discovered new insights from the questions and discussion, and have you been able to see the time as a productive, fun, enjoyable time of interaction? If not why not? This is also a good time to evaluate your own discussion leadership skills and try to each time make improvements. Please keep in mind that I have intentionally tried to keep this blog about discussion leading very open ended. These principles can apply to many situations. You will have to adjust them based on the cultural context you want to plug them into. If you have

questions about how to do that specifically in your situation, don't hesitate to send me an e-mail at BillCearbaugh@gmail.com.

We are ready now for a look at each area in detail. Let's start with the Observation Questions. These questions typically start with a "what", they are simple, straightforward and have, what seems to be obvious answers. They would almost never be a "Yes/No" kind of question. Those would be considered close-ended questions and would only leave one member the opportunity to respond. The observation step is easy to skip, but is so necessary because it identifies the the topic of discussion and gets the group thinking about the interpretations immediately. For example, What are the constructs of our power matrix in the USA? For those schooled in this area, the answer would be fairly obvious, but identifying each area logically starts an outline for the group to think about the tougher questions later. Let's say the group identified these areas, it would be a natural to then go into the the next level of questioning....How easy would it be to disable the current matrix, if there were a terrorist attack? What would be ways we could protect those systems to prevent such an attack? You have gone to the next level and asked the group to interpret the implications of some of the observations they made earlier. Or here is another observation example: How dependent have we become on electricity in the USA? If we had a blackout, how well would we be able to function as a country? Again these are general observation questions.....looking at the facts and making general observations.

Let's say you are holding a book group and you are reading a selection from a particular book. Take the first section of the book and ask a question like this....What ways has the author prepared us in the introduction for what is to come later in the book? This is a very open ended question. Often observation questions are very open ended. You want to construct a question that has the possibility for many, many answers. Thus you will get many responses back from your group members.

Or how about leading a board for your local volunteer organization. You are responsible for helping the board discuss the problem of donors giving less in an economic recession. You might lead in with a question like this: In light of the recession, what are ways we could improve our bottom line and our donor base? Again this is a VERY open ended question. There are many possible responses and there is no wrong answer. Or you may ask, what projects can you think of that we could initiate that would generate income for our

organization quickly? Here is the formula for observation questions: Simple, open ended, no wrong answers, possibility for many answers, generate excitement for everyone to respond. Once you get the observations out, you will have very little trouble transitioning to the the interpretation questions. The group now knows you want to hear their response and you, the leader value everyone's idea. They will want to give you feedback about your next line of questioning because they feel good about their answer to your first level of questioning.

Interpretation can be very easy, if you have set the stage with great observation questions. When you get the group interacting, they begin to ask one another questions, and before you know it, they are the ones asking the tougher questions. If this happens, don't squelch their enthusiasm. Go with the flow. It will allow the group to see that you trust them and approve of the direction the group is heading. At some point interject with a few redirecting questions to make certain everyone participates, and when the embers cool down a bit, begin to ask your interpretation questions. Most often these questions will begin with a "why" or "what does this mean" question. As the discussion group makes their observations, you are trying to get them to drill down to deeper issues and meanings. For example, let's say a comment made by the group is; "Our country should not be involved in abortion." You, as a leader can respond with, "Why should we not be involved in this activity?" If we do not participate in this movement, what might be some exceptions? Or should there be any exceptions?" I have not been kind, I have intentionally chosen a topic that often can stir our emotions, but I did this intentionally to help you see how easy it is to lead the group to more difficult questions. Now they cannot make blanket statements, they have to give full support for their reasoning. In a charged discussion like this one, you only have to throw out a couple questions and all you will have to do is be quiet, sit back and let the group talk. Again you toss in a redirection question or two, but that is all. Let the group talk and try not to draw conclusions yet. You will get an opportunity for that at the close of the discussion. If you try to draw conclusions too soon, everyone will not talk because they see you have summarized and they will be ready to move on. Encourage the group to draw out their own conclusions. You do this with more redirection questions. I have not mentioned this, but if the group tries to force you to give your opinion, just turn the tables. Ask the discussion group, "What do you think?". A simple question like this will give everyone a chance to voice their opinion. Remember, this is an inductive style of learning. You want the

group to learn by discovery. If they learn by discovery, they will really learn and remember the principle for a long time, as opposed to you, the leader talking non-stop. Keep in mind that we forget 80% of what we hear in a day, so the inductive method is a much more powerful tool for change.

Interpreting values and principles can often keep a group talking late into the night. When you get to this level of discussion, you are on your road to building a life changing discussion group that will develop into a group that will likely be friends forever. Don't miss out on such a rich experience by keeping a group talking about simple observation questions. Force them to think harder by asking the tough questions.

Correlation questions can sometimes be tough to develop and even harder to understand. With them you want your group to step back and gain perspective. The way we do this is by making certain we have all the information related to the topic. It is easy to have tunnel vision in whatever topic your group is discussing. The way to prevent tunnel vision is to help everyone think outside the box. What are we missing here? How do all these parts fit together and make the whole pie? In a book study group, you might ask a question like, “How does chapter 7 fit in context with the whole book?” or “What is the significance of chapter 7, in light of the theme of the book?” Now you are attempting to make the group get inside the author's head and think about his/her intentions and what the book, as a whole is all about. Or you may be leading a discussion at your church on a topic and when you arrive at the correlation point, you may ask, “Is this an isolated issue or are there other examples found in the Bible that support what we have talked about?” Again, you are helping the group think in light of the whole context of the Bible and giving them questions that motivate them to see if your discussion is on target or your developing your own concept based on one or two passages, and is not congruent with the whole of the Bible. Making sure you cover the correlation questions will provide safe guards for tunnel vision. Make sure you cover this area, so everyone leaves with the bigger picture.

Application questions usually are not difficult. By the time your group arrives at this point, often applications to the topics of discussion just flow out. People see the need for change and then they begin to see in their minds how those changes could take place. But in spite of this, you need to be prepared as a discussion leader to either guide the application discussion or offer questions that will help those having trouble thinking through the

application process. Typically, these questions will take some form of, "What action will you take...?" You can vary the question, but basically these questions will take on a form similar to this. The summary questions and application questions can often go hand in hand. As the group thinks through the discussion, they will summarize for themselves what was discussed. This summary then may very well become the area that the group member will want to apply themselves. After the summary discussion, you may want to ask a question like, "Now that we have summarized our time together, what steps would you like to take to make a difference either for you personally or for our group?" Give the members a few minutes to reflect and then ask everyone to informally share what they think. Because this section of a discussion can be highly personal, do not force people to talk. Some members may not feel the freedom to openly tell what they want to do. Others may not feel so comfortable and feel the need to not say anything. Remind the group that no one has to share, but if they would like to they may. Again, this is often where a leader is tempted to want everyone go around the group one after another and tell everyone their answer. Do not give in to this yearning. Continue to keep the environment a relaxed, informal one and only let those who want to talk, open up and talk. And let everyone do it in random order. It reminds the members that you are there to guide the group and to help them inductively learn, not poke, prod, and speak.

The key to unlock the door for application questions is reflection. As the group reflects on the previous discussion, the application for each member becomes more apparent. Be patient and let the members have time and space to think, and develop their action plan. Don't be afraid of silence in a group. It will yield remarkable changes for the group and many times for each of the members.

For more tips about how to successfully lead a discussion group, write me at:

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