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For Leaders

of Small Group Discussions

to learn together by involving group members in sharing ideas

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE . . .

YOUR JOB AS DISCUSSION LEADER . . .

PARTS OF THE DISCUSSION . . . setting the stage

PARTS OF THE DISCUSSION . . . leading the discussion

PARTS OF THE DISCUSSION . . . wrapping up

WHAT TO DO IF . . . the group can't get started

WHAT TO DO IF . . . someone dominates the discussion

WHAT TO DO IF . . . the group gets off the subject

WHAT TO DO IF . . . interest lags

WHAT TO DO IF . . . discussion gets too heated

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This folder is designed so you can take it into a discussion with you. The sections are color coded so you can refer to the one you want as the discussion goes on. The first section, "YOUR JOB AS DISCUSSION LEADER," gives an overview of what you should accomplish as leader. "PARTS OF THE DISCUSSION" explains what goes in the beginning, middle, and end of the discussion. The final section, "WHAT TO DO IF," deals with the most common problems that leaders face. For each problem, simple suggestions or key phrases are given to help you deal with awkward situations.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE . . .

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The best discussion leader is one who can get others to talk. A talkative leader usually cuts down on the group members' participation. Your job is to:

- *arrange the group so they are sitting as close together as possible, and can see each other;
- *get others' ideas out for airing;
- *keep the group on the subject;
- *encourage everyone to participate;
- *watch the time so you can cover the discussion questions of most interest to your group;
- *summarize important points; and
- *allow time for the "wrap-up."

The following three sections spotlight some steps in a discussion that are particularly important to handle well.

As a discussion leader you:

- *see that everyone is introduced;
- *select a recorder if one has not been appointed;
- *explain what the discussion group is expected to accomplish;
- *try to be friendly and good-natured, but show you mean business;
- *lay the ground rules:
 - everyone is expected to stay on the subject;
 - no one dominates the discussion—no long talks;
 - each member will have a chance to participate;
 - the purpose of the discussion is not to come up with one “right” answer.
- *explain that your role is to:
 - withhold your own opinion;
 - try to keep the group on the subject;
 - assist the recorder in summarizing the discussion.
- *ask if there are any questions.

Everyone should participate in the discussion. However, some groups expect the leader to do most of the talking, and may remain silent at the beginning of the discussion. Your job is to get them to do the talking. To do that:

- *ask the group members for first reactions or general impressions on the topic.
- *if you have prepared discussion questions, ask someone to read the first discussion question. If you do not have prepared questions, have the members raise some that they would like to discuss.
- *if there is a silence, try to "wait out" the group members. Remain silent 2 or 3 minutes. Usually someone will say something. This puts the responsibility on the group members, and takes it off your shoulders.
- *your occasional nod or "uh-huh" will encourage more response, but there should not be comment on each response.
- *as a last resort, ask someone to respond.

Once the discussion is going, the leader can best help the group by letting the group members do the talking. Try to bring everyone into the discussion and keep it on the subject.

If problems arise during the discussion, check the "What to do if" section. Otherwise, sit back and make an occasional summary of the discussion.

Five minutes before the end of the discussion, wrap up the discussion.

If the discussion was good, say, "We had a good discussion."

OR

If it didn't go so well, find something good to say about it.

Repeat briefly the purpose of the discussion. Say, "In our discussion, we were asked to _____."

Ask the group to summarize the important points. Say, "What do you think are the important points we have made?"

Ask the recorder to read the report back to the group.

PARTS OF THE DISCUSSION . . . wrapping up

Try having someone rephrase the discussion topics.

Go around the group asking if someone has a response.

Ask one of the resource people to tell more about the topic.

Go on to another discussion topic. Ask another group member to introduce it.

WHAT TO DO IF . . . the group can't get started

Ask, "How do the rest of you feel about that idea?"

Say, "Okay, that's a good point; may we move on to someone else?"

Point out the problem by saying, "We have heard from _____, let's hear from some of the rest of you."

Go around the group again, asking if someone has a response.

As a last resort, restate the ground rules.

WHAT TO DO IF . . . someone dominates the discussion

Ask, "Are we off the subject?"

Say, "We're talking about _____, but our topic is supposed to be _____."

WHAT TO DO IF . . . the group gets off the subject

Be sure the discussion does not remain too long on a single point. Say, "Have we covered that point and may we go on?"

Is someone dominating the discussion? See section on "What to do if . . . someone dominates the discussion."

If no one talks for a while, the leader need not step in—sometimes people need time to think.

Maybe people need more information. Say, "Do we have enough information? Should we call on a resource person at this point?" Or, "Is this an area we will need to study on our own?"

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Say, "We have two viewpoints here. Are there any other views?"

Emphasize the importance of getting many viewpoints.

Say, "This really isn't the place where we can settle that issue, so maybe we should move on to the next topic."

Remind the group that in this discussion we aren't looking for one right answer. Differing views are welcome.