
DEALING WITH DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

As your small group develops, individual personalities emerge. Your challenge as a small group leader is to learn to work with the personalities in your small group and help your group members grow individually even as they learn to function as a group.

Here are six types of personalities you may encounter. The aim isn't to stereotype group members, but to forewarn you of common traits and characteristics you'll encounter in your small group, and then to help you find ways to minister more effectively to them.

THE TALKER

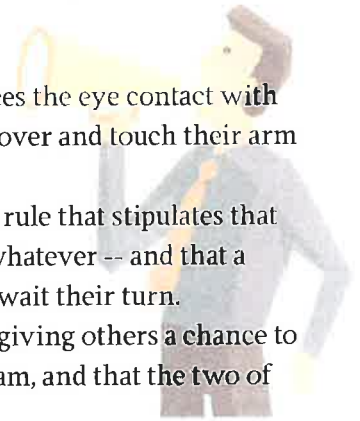
Description:

This person never stops talking and has a comment for everything. You're tempted to apply duct tape, but don't -- there are more productive ways to handle this person.

Possible Solutions:

- Position the talker next to you when you begin your group. This reduces the eye contact with them when you ask a question. This strategy also allows you to reach over and touch their arm (usually a silent but effective cue) when they interrupt someone.
- If you have a whole group of Talkers, you may want to try the ground rule that stipulates that the small group must circulate an object -- a stuffed animal, nerf ball, whatever -- and that a group member must possess it before speaking. This will help Talkers wait their turn.
- If the problem persists, get some time alone with them and talk about giving others a chance to answer the questions. Strive to help them feel like they are on your team, and that the two of you need to work together to encourage the others to respond.

Caution: Chances are, the talker has some natural leadership ability that you should encourage. You may promote their participation by letting them lead the small group now and then. This can help them appreciate what you endure as a leader, they may become more supportive when you lead.



THE THINKER

Description:

This person is quieter (and usually more shy) than the others, with a tendency to get drowned out by the louder personalities in your group.

Possible Solutions:

- Position the thinker across from you to increase their chances of eye contact with you.
- Use the method of occasionally directing questions to specific group members, thereby eliciting responses from the thinker.
- Spend one-on-one time with them to discover what interests them. This will enable you to generate a line of questioning that will bring them into the discussion.
- Use positive reinforcement to affirm them when they respond publicly.

Caution: Sometimes we interpret someone's silence as disengagement that needs to be fixed. Be mindful that some people learn best by listening and watching -- and there's a good chance your thinker is one of them.



THE KNOW-IT-ALL

Description:

This person has spent more hours in the church than everyone here combined. They grew up in the church from nursery to young-adulthood, and consequently, they know more about the Bible than anyone else in your small group. Of course, their knowledge may or may not indicate spiritual depth.

Possible Solutions:

- One way to challenge them is by not being satisfied with pat answers. Always ask why, or play devil's advocate by countering their squeaky-clean, correct answers with provocative arguments from the "wrong" side of the issue. This strategy causes them to think more deeply about their answers instead of just rattling them off.
- Avoid asking questions that invite a "right" answer. Instead, ask open-ended questions that leave room for a variety of valid responses.

Caution: This person can be the hardest to reach because they've heard it all, and therefore feel they have nothing to learn. Be gentle in your approach to remind them that the acquisition of spiritual information is not spiritual growth. The application of spiritual information is spiritual growth.

THE DISTRACTER

Description:

This is the person who can't sit still and ends up distracting everyone in your small group -- including you.

Possible Solutions:

- Rather than constantly stifling them, direct their energy toward productive ends.
 - » Pass out handouts or Bibles, set up the environment, serve refreshments, etc.
- Do some active-learning experiences with your small group like object lessons or field trips, instead of just sitting and talking week after week.
- You may better understand this person and where their energy comes from if you get together with them outside of your normal small group meeting.

Caution: Even a distracter can be good for your small group, if only because they don't let you get by with boring meetings. Your leadership skills will be sharpened as you find ways to engage them as well as the tranquil members of your group.

THE DEBATER

Description:

They irritate you by challenging every point you or anyone else tries to make. Sometimes they bring a creative energy to the group, but often they stifle the others by making them feel too threatened to voice their opinions or feelings.

Possible Solutions:

- Establish expectations or ground rules for your small group. This helps make a debater's criticism less caustic and restrains them from interrupting others in order to make a point. The ground rules could be:
 - » It's okay to disagree with opinions
 - » It is inappropriate to attack or put down other small group members if their opinions differ from yours
 - » Only one person may talk at a time

Caution: The good news: once debaters understand and abide by such rules, their input can actually enliven your discussion. Just remember that your goal is to direct, not stifle, their participation.

THE CRISIS PRODUCER

Description:

This person is in perpetual crisis and lets your small group know about it every meeting. They're often self-absorbed and, therefore, unable to participate in the discussion, except when it's focused on him.

Possible Solutions:

- Get together with them between small group meetings in order to talk through their problems with just you instead of bringing them to the small group, or enlist the "know-it-all" from your group.
- Begin your small-group discussion with the assurance that everyone will have a chance to share problems, prayer requests, etc., at the end of the group. This helps them stay focused on the sermon topic discussion.

Caution: Whatever your strategy with your crisis producer, your long-term goal is to help them see past their crisis to a solution, and then to participate in your small group without having to constantly bring the focus back to himself. -- What about a person who raises a legitimate crisis during the discussion? Be flexible enough to postpone your study and deal with the issue at hand.

