

LEADING DISCUSSION GROUPS

First Impressions - Making Inferences

As the leader of a group, it is important to remember that first impressions are most important. Often the first impression the group has of you as leader will determine how successful the discussion will be. Consider what happens in any relationship - how we observe and are observed - and the inferences made:

1. The first few moments of most relationships provide basic information and inferences for that relationship, whether it lasts two hours or two years.
2. If I decide I like you and would enjoy spending time with you.
 - a. I make inference about what you would enjoy, how you would react if I suggest them - what type of style I should use if I decide to suggest them.
 - b. Both of us unconsciously realize that language says one thing but generally infers something else.
 - c. I say, "Let's go see 'Terminator 2' tonight." You reply, "I saw it last Saturday". I read your eyes, facial expression, tone of voice, and make a complex set of inferences.
 - d. Meanwhile, you do the same. All this happens in about five seconds!

Notice the difference between strictly observing (noting the factual) and the inferring (guessing motivation) behind even the simplest of statements:

Observations (limited)

A. "I seldom talk to people"

B. "You ate the last piece of cake"

Inferences (unlimited)

1. I fear rejection
2. Party chatter is dull
3. I want to be thought of as cool

1. You're selfish
2. You're hungry
3. You're trying to irritate me

We aren't trying to discourage you from making inferences - it's normal: But it might be well to point out that when we personally experience difficulty in relationships, it is helpful to recognize when we are inferring (guessing) and when we are observing (noticing facts). By doing this we can check ourselves on whether our inferences are fair to the other person, and whether we are unduly letting personal biases enter into the inference.

While we are making inferences of the new students, they are doing the same of us. One way to help control the type of inference they make is to be very conscious of the language we use in expressing ourselves. If our language correctly expresses our feelings, others don't have to guess as much, with the possibility of guessing wrong. A noted psychologist has argued that a person who can express feelings in many nuances (strong, passionate, delicate, sensitive) experiences more in life just like a trained musician hears more in a symphony. When I say that I am feeling great, lousy, weird I am using very common, trite expressions. Words like carefree, mellow, elated, afraid, furious, startled, etc., express much more.

How to Lead a Discussion

1. Be sure you realize very clearly what the purpose of your discussion is to be. Here are a few samples.

- To acquire an understanding of the school life in general.
- To understand the changes that occurs during college life, particularly in the areas of values, independence and responsibility.
To become aware of the importance of continued family support and encouragement during the occurring changes.
- To realize that problems will occur and that the school has resources for helping the students solve these problems.

2. Your group should have no more than 12 people for effective discussions. Seat them all comfortably in a circle.

3. Discussion leaders must know what their roles are and are not. Most important to the group are the roles you serve as animator (bringing the group to life), catalyst (initiator of group interaction), and instigator (keeping the group interaction going). Being knowledgeable is important, but being the sole source of information or opinion can be stifling.

Use of Questions

The proper use of questions is essential to finding common ground in a group and initiating discussion. As questions of values begin to enter into discussions, how well questions are phrased will also determine whether the discussion grows or withers. To whom the question is directed is also a major factor in the success of promoting animated group discussion.

1. Lead - Off Question

The lead off question gets the discussion going, starts the group thinking, and must be so phrased that it does not mislead, confuse, put people on the defensive, or begs for one obvious answer.

Examples of poor phrasing:

- a. Why don't parents do a better job of trying to understand their son or daughter during the college years?
- b. Why doesn't the school have clear cut goals as to how they expect a student to act?

Examples of better phrasing:

- a. What do you think can be done to improve communication between you and your college student?
- b. Growth in areas such as independence and maturity is always complicated. When are clear cut expectations of students appropriate?

2. Pull-In Question

The pull in question encourages those who have not been talking to express their views. It is used when one or two have dominated the discussion or when a person may feel hesitant about stating his opinion. The question should be so phrased that it does not put an individual on the spot, offend, or call for only a yes or no answer.

Examples of poor phrasing:

- a. Do you agree with that?
- b. Jamie, I want to hear what you have to say on this matter.

Examples of better phrasing:

- a. What is the thinking of the others on this point?
- b. Jamie, I would be curious to hear your views on this, too.

3. Closed and Open Questions

Closed questions invite, a simple yes or no. They are used when you want agreement or disagreement with what you say, but do not want the other person to say much. Open questions invite elaboration and explanation. People generally feel more valued when asked open questions.

Open questions

Example: How do you feel about this?

Open questions usually begin:

what
when
how
who
where
which

Closed questions

Example: Do you feel this is fair?

Closed questions usually begin:

is
do
has
can
will
shall

4. Directing Questions

Scatter questions are so phrased that they stimulate thought and provoke all in the discussion to comment. They may be used as lead off or pull in questions, addressed to no one individual.

Single shot questions are aimed at one individual. They may be used to draw the quiet person into discussion or to get one individual to elaborate.

Example: "Marie, with your experience, what would you say about the situation?"

5. Redirecting Questions

At times when you are asked a question you may not want to answer yourself, you can redirect the question.

- **Ricochet question:** You are asked a question, such as: "How would you handle apathy among students?" Rather than give an answer, you might ask another member of the discussion, "Bob, you've been to another school before transferring here; what do you say?" This is used to stimulate more participation and discover group reaction before your own view is given; it also helps to keep you out of the "expert" role, which will build a wall between you and the new students.
- **Boomerang question:** You are asked a question but have been doing much of the talking; or you want to have the individual questioner clarify his or her statement. You reword the question or ask a question back rather than answer immediately. For example, you are asked, "Why don't we have a campus newspaper?" A boomerang questions might ask the individual "What would be the purpose of a campus newspaper?" or "That's a pretty big undertaking. Do you think students would be interested in creating a paper?"

Directing and redirecting questions in these ways is not avoiding the issue. It is a means of evoking a full response from those you want to speak. If other members want you to speak and you feel a direct answer is useful by all means answer directly.

Responding to controversial or challenging questions

A. First, make sure the student understands that you understand what is being asked. Listening to responses and acceptance responses which show interest and understanding without indicating necessarily full agreement with a student include:

- a. Nod of the head: affirmative motion of understanding
- b. Pause: visual contact with the speaker without saying or doing anything
- c. Casual remark: "I see", "yes", "That's an interesting point", "That thought struck me, too", etc.
- d. Echo: repeat back one or two words another has just spoken. The tone of the voice and manner or repeating is important in this response.
- e. Mirror: reflect back your understanding, "You feel that..... is the key notion here."

Caution: These responses are effective only if used sincerely. If you really aren't paying attention, they will seem contrived and shallow.

B. Be helpful in aiding the students to understand the issues: answer clearly and honestly when you respond. We do not expect you to say things you don't truly believe. If there are policies you don't agree with, you may say *so*, but you do owe it to the school to present, from the school's perspective, why the policy is in place. Never should you use the group as an excuse for getting on a soapbox to rail against something with which you disagree. And never should your disagreement with a policy spill over to any expression of displeasure or frustration against any individual. As a community we can afford to have honest differences of perception, but we can't afford to have personal attacks against individuals or offices.

C. Do not content or dispute: answer honestly and simply. Be hopeful of acceptance of what you have to say (if not agreement with what you have to say). Answer with a confidence that discussion of the topic will be beneficial.

Summary of Points in Lending a Discussion

I. Topic Selection

- A. Keep discussion within topic.
- B. Respond only to aspects of subject matter within topic range.

II. Making a Period (When extraneous subject matter is brought into discussion)

- A. "Thank you" No comment - move your eyes to someone else
- B. "I understand I've been through it myself. Go on to pertinent topic.
- C. "I realize that it's important to you, but we don't have time to handle it here."

III. Promoting Discussion

- A. General question - Use on quieter individual
- B. Specific question - Be careful not to embarrass

IV. Reflection - Showing Understanding

- A. Reflect meaning and/or feeling expressed
- B. Do not interpret. Reflect only what they said

V. Paring - Relationship effected between two or more from what is said

- A. Show common feelings, interests, etc.
- B. Brings on group cohesiveness. Isolated members may be brought into group
- C. Shows you're listening
- D. Caution – don't set others apart by this technique

VI. Comfort - Excitement Range

- A. Don't let either comfort or excitement get too high. Control the feeling level.
- B. Deal with problems rationally and effectively
 - a. Lower excitement - deal with content rather than feeling
 - b. Raise comfort- ask question as in III

VII. Public Relations

- A. Never allow someone to cause you to lose your cool
- B. Explain what the policies of Ringling are. Explain the reasons such policies are established. Never be defensive about them or try to minimize them. (Remember, you didn't make the policies, you are simply there to explain them).
- C. Always let the other person make up his or her own mind after the explanation; he/she has his or her own life to live. You are not expected to change anyone's mind. Tell them how you feel about a certain point but never tell them how they are to feel.

TIPS FOR THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DISCUSSION GROUP

The effectiveness of a discussion group depends on the extent to which the resources of all are used. If there is need for improvement in this area, perhaps you might like to discuss these guidelines with your group.

1) Speak your mind freely

Discussion is based on the exchange of ideas. No one else has your background, experience and training. Here is a chance to say what you think. Say it! Remember: You have a responsibility to the group besides that of listening.

2) Listen thoughtfully to others

Try to understand the other's point of view. Seek out the experiences and reasoning on which it rests. But don't accept unsupported ideas. Remember: On almost every question there are several points of view.

3) Strike while the idea is hot

Don't wait to speak until you are called on. You may forget your point or miss the best time to present it. Then, too, what you say may clarify the discussion or clear the way for action. Remember: If you wait, you may lose the chance to present that good idea.

4) Let the other person talk too

Don't speak for more than a minute or two at a time. Try to make your point in a few words. Give the others a chance. Remember: It makes little difference who carries the ball as long as it is carried.

5) Don't fight over the ownership of ideas

Once you have given an idea to the group, let it become group property. Don't try to defend it because it was yours. Remember: Discussion is not a debate.

6) Don't let the discussion get away from you

If you don't understand what is being said say so. Ask questions until you do. Relate the discussion to your own experience. Remember: Your contribution will be helpful only when you understand what is being discussed.

7) Stay on the beam

Digressions hinder progress. Keep your remarks relevant. Don't repeat what has been covered. Follow the leader. Remember: A discussion group is not the place to ride a personal hobby.