

The following article is located at:

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups/articles/challengingpeople.html>

The Challenge of Challenging People

Practical advice for those willing to minister at the margins.

by Pat J. Sikora

For most people, leading a group with one or two challenging people is more than they bargained for. But it can be done. In fact, as you gain skills and become more comfortable dealing with various types of challenging people, you might consider leading a group of people who don't seem to fit anywhere else. I first tried this because of my personal ministry to women who have been profoundly abused.

Whether we talk about it openly or not, many people in this country—even Christians—have suffered abuse, neglect, or other challenges while growing up. Often, these people find it difficult to fit in with a small group. They lack both the interpersonal and group skills necessary for success. Yet, who more than these wounded ones can benefit from the ministry of a small group? Just remember, a group can either heal or harm—depending on the skill and sensitivity of the leader.

As I've led groups of severely wounded women, I've learned several keys about what works and what doesn't.

Be sure you have a co-leader.

While I always prefer to have a co-leader, with a group of challenging people, it's essential. You'll need the expertise of another skilled person, and it's important to have someone who can report truth to church leadership or others, should that ever be necessary.

Be clear and open when inviting participants.

Many wounded people already have had problems being part of a group, whether Christian or secular. They already feel ostracized. So I'm pretty open when I choose to lead a group of challenging people. I let them know that, in addition to Bible study, we'll be developing good group skills. Most people are eager for this.

Keep it small.

A skilled leader might be able to lead a group of six to ten members, but when dealing with challenging people, limit it to four. It's OK. It'll feel like ten! You want plenty of time to do the study and to process group issues. Plus, you can expect countless distractions that will reduce your effectiveness.

Agree to the rules in advance.

I like to use a group covenant that members read, discuss, and sign. This covenant includes meeting times, attendance and punctuality expectations, goals, confidentiality requirements, boundaries, limitations on discussion, and anything else you expect to be an issue.

Members need to clearly understand your expectations and also share theirs. However, I tend to be a bit more assertive in groups like this.

Stress attendance and punctuality.

It's important to be clear about your expectations for both attendance and punctuality. Challenging people always have something come up. Their car breaks down, their kids get sick, they get sick, their favorite TV program is on, and so on. They need to understand that their absence creates a hole in the group. They also need to understand that arriving late or leaving early is disruptive.

As the leader, make sure to start on time, regardless of who is there. And try very hard to end on time, regardless of how much is left to cover. Sometimes it's helpful to schedule the first 15 minutes to 20 minutes for visiting, but clarify when members are expected to arrive and when the study or worship will begin. Talk about attendance and punctuality often and affirm those who improve in their consistency.

In one group of ten challenging people I co-led several years ago (before I had the experience to know that ten was a legion), we had a covenant for attendance. In ten weeks we had only one absence! When that one person missed a meeting, everyone else saw how important each was to the group dynamics. With only four people in the group, attendance is even more critical. While encouraging people to attend consistently and arrive on time, be realistic and learn to flex. This group will probably have a lot of attendance and punctuality issues.

Discuss group processes.

In a group of challenging people, some will talk all the time and others won't open their mouths. It's important to discuss expectations in advance, and then provide reminders when necessary. Model group processes by being lovingly open with both the talkers and observers. Feel free to cut off the person who never takes a breath and to call on the one who never ventures a comment. Use humor while being frank. You might even use a minute timer and agree in advance that each comment will go no longer than the time allowed. It's OK to call "time!" Praise the quiet one for speaking longer than last time.

This may be the most difficult leadership skill of all. Challenging people are usually lonely, and when they have someone willing to listen, many will go on and on—and on. It takes grace to lovingly cut off a member over and over and over without discounting her contribution. But in the end, she'll be grateful.

Set personal boundaries.

Since many challenging people are lonely, they may want to become your new best friends. I set moderately firm boundaries, especially in dealing with such people. I tell members that I'm not always available to answer the telephone and that when I do, I may not be able to talk for long. I make sure members understand that my family is my priority and requires much of my time. Then, if I'm spending time with family, I let the machine answer the phone, and I call back when I can. If I have limited time to talk, I tell the caller immediately, and then try to stick to that limit.

Challenging people always have a crisis. They always need to talk. I need to give up my Messiah complex and remember that they reached their present age without me and will probably live many more years without my undivided attention.

Enforce confidentiality.

As with any group, confidentiality is essential. You'll hear amazing stories that you'll be tempted to share with family and friends. Don't. Even challenging people need to know their private lives are private. Enforce confidentiality in the group as well, dealing with breeches immediately and firmly.

However, you'll need to be aware of your state's mandated reporting requirements and follow them. Use good judgment if you learn or sense that a member or another person is being hurt or is in danger. If you have a co-leader, schedule a few minutes after the meeting to debrief before returning home. This will help you refocus and carry less emotional contamination to your family. If your group is especially challenging, you may also want to have a therapist or pastor to debrief with occasionally. Of course, these must be people who can hold a confidence.

Leading a group of challenging people can be, well—challenging. But you'll be glad you did. Watching them grow will be the most enriching experience you've had in a long time!

Excerpt from Why Didn't You Warn Me? By Pat Sikora. © 2007 Standard Publishing, www.Standardpub.com. Used by permission.

Interested in learning more about ministering to challenging people within your small group? Check out these training downloads from BuildingSmallGroups.com:

- [Shepherding People in Pain](#)—Everyone experiences pain at different points in their lives, and as a small-group leader you will need to shepherd people who are suffering. Learn how to care for, listen to, and minister to people in pain.
- [Small Group and Mentoring Dilemmas: Case Study Pack](#)—How do you handle small groups that have lost focus or purpose? What can be done if relationships sour? These discussion tools help your group think about the larger purposes of small groups.



www.ChristianityToday.com
AOL Keyword and CompuServe GO: ChristianityToday.com
Copyright © 1994–2006 Christianity Today International