

## **10 Things They Never Told You About Being a SGM Facilitator**

*From Unitarian Universalist Church of Delaware County, Media, Pennsylvania  
Small Group Ministry Journal, Fall 2012/Winter 2013*

*In preparation for some in-house training for new and potential Small Group Ministry facilitators at our church, the SGM Team got together to compile a list of the top ten things about the job that the training cannot fully prepare you for. We presented this in the format of a David Letterman Top Ten skit. Our thanks to our friends at Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon, PA, for allowing us to pilot this with them. So here goes....*

### ***Number 10. Covenant Schmoovenant - Can't we all just get along?***

We are taught that one of the first things to establish is the covenant for the group, but we rarely start from scratch because, for many group members (and facilitators!), this is not their first rodeo. However, we should always take the opportunity at the first meeting to review and refresh our memories of the content and function of the covenant. In particular, the group is empowered to invoke the covenant and it is not set in stone; it can be changed if the need arises.

### ***Number 9. Food Glorious Food***

What would seem a simple decision for the group can be the source of some disagreement and needs to be clarified at the outset. Do we have food at all? If so, what? Who provides it? Brown bagging? When do we eat? Grazing or take a break? How do we respect food preferences and allergies?

### ***Number 8. The Art of Herding Cats!***

Outside of the meetings, how do we maintain communication with the group? Some of our members are technologically challenged and even email can be problematic. Resorting to individual phone calls, while personal, can be time-consuming and makes sending pre-reading materials difficult. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the folks who are "jiggy with it" when it comes to technology: the Smartphone generation who would prefer to use any IM/Twitter/Facebook/Cloud Collaboration.

### ***Number 7. Size Does Matter***

Can a group be too big or too small, and does it matter? We had a group that declined to 4 members. We tried all avenues to recruit more people, but when we failed, we mutually agreed to suspend the group. At the other extreme, a coordination hiccup resulted in 14 members being assigned to a group. This proved to be untenable: members were not realizing the full benefit of the program and some diplomacy was required in implementing re-assignments.

### ***Number 6. Speak Softly, Carry a Talking Stick***

We typically covenant to show respect for each other when we are talking. This is particularly important to enforce during check-in, keeping the group on topic and controlling interruptions. Remind the group that they are all empowered to apply this aspect of the covenant. One member was difficult to stop from interrupting during check-in, yet during "Likes and Wishes" at the end of one meeting, she said she wished people would stop interrupting her! To establish order, one group introduced a soft toy. Members could only talk if they were holding the "Talking Giraffe." Interestingly, this highlighted the problem and over time the giraffe became unnecessary.

### ***Number 5. Service Projects - the Abilene Paradox***

I first encountered the Abilene Paradox in business school. A group of managers could not agree on the location for a meeting, so ended up in Abilene where no one wanted to go, but no one could object to.

The idea of performing a service project as a Small Group is easy to accept in principle. Finding the project that everyone can support is more problematic. As strong minded UUs, we struggle with achieving consensus and then committing to a project we cannot fully support for personal or physical reasons. The concept of providing a social service or value and working together as a group is often lost in the fog of the selection process.

***Number 4. Tardiness is next to Godliness***

The members show respect for each other by being on time for the meeting, staying for the duration, and generally adhering to the time allocation for each component of the meeting. The art of the facilitator is to be flexible and recognize the direction of the group. An extreme example was a member who was regularly late. One time she arrived 90 minutes into the meeting and expected the group to repeat everything she had missed during the topic discussion.

***Number 3. There is no TEAM in I***

SGM group members' contributions represent their personal experience and feelings and this is especially true at check-in. Enforcing this is one of the most difficult facilitator roles. The very best method is to set an example in your own check-in. We need to emphasize the "self-interest" of the individual, the one time when we encourage selfishness. It also important to think about check-in before arriving, making check-in personal, meaningful, and succinct. One member prepared a list of activities he had attended and proceeded to read them, complete with plots of plays and book reviews. He was quite offended when he was told that he was expected to share something personal about his feelings.

***Number 2. There's no crying in SGM?***

Every SGM group is different in terms of personalities, behavior, bonding and openness. But there will be times, often unexpected, of extreme emotions, highs, lows, and traumatic stories. We must resist the temptation to diagnose or resolve, although follow-up after the meeting is OK. We need to develop skills in identifying body language signals, active listening and eye contact. I was in one group that achieved a level of comfort and security with each other to share some of their deepest emotions. On one memorable occasion a member shared a story of an attempted suicide as an angst ridden teenager. It was a story that had the group in tears but was the beginning of a very tight relationship that lasted beyond the group and allowed others to feel confident about sharing some pretty raw feelings. Handling these situations well can be incredibly rewarding for the facilitator, but don't forget the Kleenex!

*and finally....*

***Number 1. I Could Have Laughed All Night***

Laughter is a powerful medicine. Humor can be a great ice breaker, infectious, eclectic, variable, limiting, distracting and therapeutic. One of our session topics led to a member talking about being bullied at school. To lighten the mood, I described a recent high school reunion where the geeks who had been the target of bullies got their revenge by having the most successful careers, beautiful families, and fabulous lifestyles. This started a series of humorous school reunion stories from the group, usually involving bad clothing and hair choices, that had everyone chuckling!

***Try not to take yourself too seriously ... be careful out there ... and remember to have FUN!***

*Prepared and submitted by Peter Cooke on behalf of the dedicated team of SGM Organizers and Facilitators at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Delaware County in Media, Pennsylvania.*

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Fall 2012