

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network
How to Handle Challenging Situations
From the UU Church in Eugene, OR, Facilitator Training Manual
(adapted from First Unitarian Society in Newton, Massachusetts)

Most SGM groups will go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. However, there are challenges that occasionally arise in any group process. Here are some of the most common challenges you are likely to encounter, together with some suggestions about effective ways to deal with them.

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Challenge One: Certain participants seem shy and don't say anything.

Suggested responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. It should always be permissible to "pass". Make eye contact, it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non-verbal cues that may indicate they are ready to speak. Frequently, participants will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a SGM group and will join in then. Some people simply need more time or more quiet time to process their thoughts and feelings. When someone finally does chime in with a brief comment after staying long on the sidelines you can give encouragement by expressing genuine interest and saying something like, "Please tell me more." It may be helpful to talk informally with people both before and after the formal SGM session.

Challenge Two: An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion or interrupts people who are speaking.

Suggested response: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide domineering participants. Once it becomes clear to you what this person is doing, you **MUST** intervene and set limits. If you suspect that making eye contact with this person would make her/him feel as though you are encouraging them to speak, then start by limiting your eye contact with them. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate. "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the talkative person by name, "Charlie, we've heard from you. Now let's hear what some of the others have to offer." Be careful to moderate your comments and tone of voice; you are trying to make a point without offending the dominating person.

Ask the person who constantly interrupts to please stop interrupting by saying, "Our covenant calls for us to listen without interrupting and Pat has not finished yet." You may also need to check in with the interrupter outside of the group meeting, since speech patterns can be cultural and the interrupter may not see it as an interruption.

Here are some optional strategies to consider that may be helpful with facilitating each person being able to have a fair share of time for speaking, and for time management.

Use a "talking stick or object" to indicate who is talking and when the person is finished. Indicate when one is through speaking with a gesture or a phrase such as "I am finished". Have a clock visible to the person speaking for self-monitoring of time, or have a timekeeper or use a timer or to indicate when the allotted time for a person's sharing is reached.

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Challenge 3: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off topic.

Suggested responses: Responding to this challenge takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the dialogue along, but it is not always clear which way it is, or

should be, going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off topic now. How is the group feeling about this?" If only one participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say, "We seem to be wandering off course and I'd like to make sure others get a chance to speak."

Challenge 4: Someone puts forth information which you know to be false.

Suggested response: Ask, "Has anyone heard of conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the dialogue, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that even experts often disagree.

Challenge 5: Lack of interest, no excitement, and no one wants to talk, only a few people are actively participating.

Suggested response: This rarely happens in SGM groups. However, if a facilitator talks more than the group enjoys, or does not give people plenty of time to collect their thoughts and respond, members may become silent and passive. People need time to think, reflect and get ready to speak up; give it to them. Occasionally you might have lack of excitement in the topic because the group seems to be in agreement or dealing only with the surface issues of the topic. Sometimes members may not think that discussing a topic is appropriate based on something revealed during check-in. Regardless of the reason, you should check out the appearance of a lack of interest with group members by saying something like, "I'm not sensing much energy in the room for this topic. Do we want to continue with it or talk about something else?" Then be silent and wait to hear from several members, not just one. You may need to go around the whole circle in order to get a clear idea of what is going on.

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Challenge 6: Tension or open conflict in the group arises: two participants lock horns and argue, or one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Suggested responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas help to clarify one's thinking. Explain that for conflict to be productive, it must be focused upon the issue, and on the legitimately different ways of viewing it. It is acceptable to challenge someone's facts, but personal attacks and challenges to personal beliefs are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so because of the established covenant that prohibits such behaviors and encourages tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help: if group members bought into the covenant, they will support you. You may also need to talk one-on-one with the person who engaged in the prohibited behavior.

Challenge 7: One member engages in ax-grinding, telling negative stories about a third party of group who is not in the room.

Suggested responses: As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide members who forget the SGM covenant and engage in questionable behaviors. You must intervene by saying something like, "I am not comfortable hearing this in this SGM setting. It sounds like something between you and someone who is not here to present their side of the story. I'm not clear how it relates to the SGM topic we are considering. If it is related, could you perhaps tell us how it is related to the topic without naming names?"

Challenge 8: People start offering unsolicited advice and trying to problem solve for a group member.

Suggested responses: As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide members who forget the SGM covenant. You must intervene, but you must also use caution here. You may

choose to say something like, "Please let me remind the group that our covenant prohibits offering unsolicited advice. Pat, if you want the group's input, let us know and you can chat with folks after the group session ends." If the issue is a cataclysmic one, the group may choose to abandon its topic time and minister to its members. Usually, however, the ministry of the group is focused on witnessing each other's spiritual growth.

Challenge 9: A member uses categorical language or engages in slurs presenting some category of people in a stereotypical way; often this can be presented under the guise of humor.

Suggested response: As facilitator, it is your responsibility to contain and guide members who engage in questionable behaviors. You must intervene by saying something like, "I am not comfortable with this sort of language (or humor). It seems to be that it is stereotyping certain people in a negative way that really is not funny to me or them. I hope you will not use it again."

Editor's Note: I agree that it is important to respond in some way to all three of these situations. My response is to call a moment of silence followed by an "I statement" from me. During the moment of silence, I try to think of something to say that is loving but calls attention to the violation of the covenant. I also like to acknowledge, implicitly or explicitly, that we all violate the covenant at some point. The main point is to give these situations some thought before they occur and to be prepared to address them.