

Tips for Facilitators

From Linda Griffin, Small Group Ministry Facilitator and Coordinator, UU Fellowship of Briarcliff, Croton, and Ossining, NY
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My Community Circle Group had been going strong for over four years. Below are some suggestions for helping your group become a cohesive unit. Remember, it takes time for groups to develop trust, so if your group is new or hasn't yet bonded, choose topics that are not too personal.

BEFORE THE MEETING

Send the topic questions to the group several days before the meeting. This gives importance to the upcoming discussion. Encourage people to jot down their thoughts at home and bring them to the meeting. Even if just one or two people do this, the discussion will have more depth.

On occasion, group members are asked to submit questions they would like included in the discussion. I have found that asking for participation in advance of the discussion encourages people to attend the meeting. Here is an example of what happened when I asked my group for additional questions on the topic of *clutter*.

Hi Linda,

Great questions, as always. A couple of thoughts:

Have you ever thrown something out that you later wanted/needed?

Are you hanging on to anything that you know you'd like to get rid of?

why?

There's a quote out there in the universe somewhere - something to the effect of "If a cluttered desk is the sign of a cluttered mind, what does an empty desk mean?"

See you soon,

Joy

I forwarded the above questions to my group with the following note:

Joy added these question and they are good ones! I love the quote/question. Thanks, Joy.

This back and forth keeps the whole group engaged and looking forward to the next meeting.

Send a reminder two days before the meeting. Include a catchy quote related to the topic.

THE MEETING

We adhere to our covenant as much as possible. (We wrote our covenant several months after we started to meet.) The opening words, lighting the chalice, etc. give the meeting structure. Our covenant does not allow for cross talk during check in or the first go around, but we remain flexible about this when needed. We prefer to focus on listening, and refrain from asking questions because they can steer people in a direction they don't want to go. Silence is our way of showing respect for the speaker and what she/he chooses to tell us. It also teaches us to listen, rather than think about how we are going to respond.

During the discussion part of the meeting, ask a topic question to pull everyone back when the conversation gets off track. Sometimes it's helpful to suggest that extraneous discussion be continued after the meeting. Also, group members are always asked if they would like to add anything to the discussion before the meeting ends.

AFTER THE MEETING

In my opinion, socializing after the meeting is important and allows the group to connect on a different level. Our 10:00 AM meeting ends with a pot luck lunch and it's something we all look forward to. It's such an important part of our coming together that evening groups would do well to consider ending the discussion a half hour early to allow for coffee and conversation.

An email with a brief summary of the discussion is sent immediately to group members who were absent. Included is a personal message about how they were missed.

A group member who appears unusually distant or upset during the discussion receives a phone call. Emails are sent to individuals thanking them for their helpful or insightful comments. Showing concern and appreciation when warranted goes a long way in keeping the group together. If time is an issue, the facilitator can delegate other group members to make calls or send emails.

Birthdays are acknowledged with a birthday cake. Holidays are celebrated with decorations and special food. When a member left the group to move to Canada, each of us wrote something special about the person on an index card and put the cards in a pretty package to give to her at the last meeting. We presented the departing member with a group gift as well.

In addition, together we helped our Fellowship with fundraising activities. This year we worked with The Green Sanctuary committee to set up its first Sustainability Fair. These activities bring our group closer to each other and to the larger fellowship.

ADDING NEW MEMBERS

Before a newly assigned member participates in our Community Circle group I invite them to my home for coffee and cake. It gives the new member a chance to ask questions and learn how the group operates. I take this time to go over our covenant and address any concerns the new member has. Most importantly, we just have a good time chatting. New members feel more comfortable coming into an established group when they know what is expected. Don't have time for coffee and cake? Discuss the above on the phone.

THE CHALLENGING GROUP

I also conduct a Discussion Circle at my mother's senior residence. This group consists of ten to twelve women in their 80's and 90's. It's easy for the conversation to go off track - very off track - and some of the participants would speak non-stop if allowed. Several people are hard-of-hearing and a few have vision problems. (One woman thought it was a meeting to complain about food service at the residence and went on a tirade about that.) I have found that repeating the rules - that we're not here to give advice, debate or challenge anyone - at the start of every meeting keeps conflict to a minimum. Using a hand signal (making a large T) indicating when the speaker needs to bring their comments to a close, works well in keeping the discussion moving along. When the discussion goes off track, I bring it back with, "We're speaking about _____ now." If warranted, "Let's talk about that later." Using a pretend microphone or "talking stick," where only the person holding it may speak, drastically cuts down on people interrupting the speaker. When I discussed the "talking stick" with the group, I suggested they try it, and stated it would be their decision to continue using it or not. They loved it!

After the food tirade experience, I decided to write the topic questions on a large piece of paper so those who have difficulty hearing can see the questions we are talking about. There are a couple of people who feel reluctant about participating, one because she had a stroke and is self-conscious about speaking, and the other because she feels she has little to contribute. I made a point of privately complementing them both for their limited participation by stating specific things they added to the discussion. Both women are now regulars and enjoy the discussion group.

The Discussion Circle has been an enriching experience for all participants. Many of the women moved to the senior residence recently, and this is a way for them to share their life stories and make new friends.

You may not have time to act on all of these suggestions, but doing a few of them some of the time can help your group prosper. Good luck!