

The Jesus MeetUp Facilitator Considerations

Jesus made clear to the three the difference between the requirements of apostleship and discipleship.

And even then he did not forbid the exercise of prudence and foresight by the twelve. What he preached against was not forethought but anxiety, worry. He taught the active and alert submission to God's will. In answer to many of their questions regarding frugality and thriftiness, he simply called attention to his life as carpenter, boatmaker, and fisherman, and to his careful organization of the twelve. He sought to make it clear that the world is not to be regarded as an enemy; that the circumstances of life constitute a divine dispensation working along with the children of God. 140:8.3

50 Tips For Leading A Small Group

By Vince Antonucci

Leading a [Jesus MeetUp] small group study is an amazing way to make a difference with your life. Small study groups are powerful vehicles for catalyzing life change and spiritual growth. Perhaps the idea of leading a small group sounds exciting but also intimidating. Maybe you've never done it. Or it could be that you've led a group but feel like you could be more effective.

I led my first small group twenty-two years ago as an intern in Louisville, Kentucky. I was psyched, passionate, and petrified. I wanted my group to be great, but knew very little about successfully leading a group.

I've led a group most of the thousand weeks since, and I've picked up a lot of ideas and lessons on effective small group leadership. I thought I might help you by sharing some of what I've learned. Here are 50 tips.

Tips leading up to your group's first meeting:

1. Pray!

A successful [Jesus MeetUp] group will be a God thing, so pray that God blesses your leadership and helps your group to be everything He has in mind.

2. Confirm the details with your potential attendees, even if they already know.

Send an email clearly letting everyone know the details. For instance:

"Our [Jesus MeetUp] group starts this week. We're meeting this Wednesday at 7:00pm at my house. You don't have to bring anything other than a your book. Here's my address (include the address where you will meet). Here's my phone number in case you have any questions or won't be able to make it (include phone number)."

3. Before people show up, turn on every light on the floor of the house where they'll be entering and your group will be meeting.

Making it bright will create a warm environment.

4. Before people show up, turn on some background music.

Coming into a house with music playing is more inviting. Make sure to turn the music off once you're ready to begin your meeting.

5. Before people show up, have your couch/chairs set up in a circle and ready to go.

6. Greet people at the door with a big smile.

Let them know that in the future they can come right in.

7. You may want to consider using name tags for the first meeting, especially if your group is fairly large

8. Have food and a variety of beverage options.

You don't have to make the food fancy, but you do need to have food. Food makes people feel comfortable and promotes interaction and conversation. Later on ask for help with this.

9. Once you're ready to begin start with a good ice breaker game or question.

Most people will be nervous to talk in group, and getting everyone to say something early on will make it much easier for them to say more later. Start with something easy to answer question like, "What's your hometown and your favorite thing about it?" or "What's your favorite restaurant?" or "Who is the most famous person you've ever met, or almost met?" An icebreaker game would be something like "I Never"...and then the group members finish the sentence. (sometimes also called, "Never Have I").

10. I often start my group meetings with a quick icebreaker game AND an icebreaker question.

Doing both may take up ten of our ninety minutes, but I think it's worth it. Creating a fun, open environment where we're interacting and laughing together will pay big dividends later in helping people to feel connected to and able to open up to each other. For the icebreaker question, I usually try to think of one that connects with and leads into the topic we'll be studying that night. (So, for instance, if we're looking at a book passage about marriage, I might ask, "Who is your favorite all-time TV family, and why?")

11. For the first meeting, keep the study fairly short and light, if you do a study at all. You might just have each person share a (short version) of their story.

("Why don't we each take 2-3 minutes to tell a little about ourselves so we know who we're in group with. Tell us a bit of your background, maybe family, maybe job, maybe spiritually.")

12. In that first meeting, you definitely want to share the purpose of the group and your vision for its future.

Things like: In this group we're going to accept each other where we're at. We'll love and never judge. Confidentiality is also a value in this group. What happens in group, stays in group. We're going to grow closer to each other and to God.

13. In the first meeting, I cast a vision for multiplication.

I talk about how we're all going to love this experience and wonder why we didn't get in a group sooner. And we're going to want others to experience what we are. That's why our world needs more and more [smaller] groups, so everyone can get in one [and make new friends]. In light of that, one of my hopes for this group is that future leaders will be developed so future groups can start out of ours.

14. Some groups in the first meeting establish a group agreement that outlines expectations for the group [for confidentiality, acceptance and sensitivity].

It can be helpful. What I do do is ask everyone to make the group a priority, and to let me know if they won't be making it. I also emphasize that we will always practice acceptance and confidentiality.

15. Leave some time at the end of your first meeting for prayer requests.

Let everyone know that each week there will be an opportunity for them to share good things that we can celebrate together or things that require prayer.

16. Don't make anyone pray [if they don't want to].

In the future, as people become more comfortable, you can challenge them to step out of their comfort zone, but don't push too hard too fast.

17. End your group on time, or early.

When the group time officially ends, don't force people out. If they linger and mingle for awhile, that's a great sign the group is getting off to a healthy start.

Tips related to leading your group beyond your first meeting:

18. Don't try to be perfect.

When you meet someone who acts like they're perfect, does that impress you? No! At best, it makes you feel like you can't relate. At worst, it makes you suspicious. People aren't looking for perfect; they're looking for real. Be real. Show some vulnerability. That will endear you to people.

19. You don't need to have all the answers.

You may feel like, since you're the leader, that you need to have an answer for every question. You don't. People will understand if you say, "I don't know. Let me try to find out the answer to that

question this week.” Not only will they understand, they will admire your humility. It also may inspire them to think they too could lead a small group.

20. Don’t be too formal.

Don’t run your group like a business meeting. You are creating a spiritual family, and your meetings should have a fun, comfortable feeling.

21. Allow a little messiness.

Families are messy, right? Well, my family is a little messy. Families are messy because people are messy. In group we don’t want to put on a veneer of spiritual perfection that makes everyone feel like they can’t be real and admit their weaknesses and fears. Messiness can be intimidating, but it’s a breeding ground for grace.

22. View the people in your group as friends and family – not just group members.

I know, I’ve already said that. I’m trying to make sure you don’t miss it!

23. Do things outside of group time.

People probably want to meet outside of group time, but need you as the leader to initiate it. So have everyone go out for ice cream, or meet at the park for a cookout on Saturday, or ... you name it.

24. In addition to social events outside of group time, you may want to have your group serve together.

One possibility is to mention your desire for your group to serve together after a couple of meetings, and solicit ideas for where you might serve. Or you can look for serving options in your community and then bring your suggestions to the group.

25. One issue with doing things outside of group night, in our fast-paced overly-busy society, is that people may say they want to but don’t have the time.

One way of overcoming that issue is to do your non-meeting get together-s on your group night. So instead of meeting for your normal living room book study, maybe six times a year you meet at a homeless shelter where you serve dinner together.

26. With serving together outside of your group time, you can start small.

Instead of making an ongoing commitment, try something one time, just to give people a taste of meeting outside group time. You could wrap gifts at Christmas time, or get ideas from the group.

Tips related to having food at your group meetings:

27. The first night of the group you should supply the snacks.

But on that first night, or sometimes the second night, I usually establish a snack sign-up sheet or schedule. I have people take turns bringing the food, telling them it doesn't need to be amazing. Having people bring food increases their ownership and gives them another reason to show up on their nights.

28. By the way, giving out other rotating (or established) roles can also create ownership and increase attendance consistency.

You may want to set up a rotation of who is going to lead the icebreaker game or question, or who reads etc...

29. Make sure the snacks are accessible.

If you put the food in a room that is hard to get to or out of the way they may never get touched. Food can help people feel more comfortable.

30. Let people know if they are coming straight from work and need to bring dinner with them it's not a problem.

Tips related to leading the group discussion:

31. A small group setting lends itself to group discussion, not to a lesson.

People tend to learn better when they are actively involved, and sitting in a circle makes a lesson feel awkward and a discussion feel natural.

32. Your job, as leader, is to facilitate a discussion that gets everyone involved.

When I train small group leaders I tell them to think of a pinball machine. In the group discussion the pinball is who is talking. Your role is to be the flipper. In pinball you don't score points when the ball is touching the flipper, and in a small group "winning" happens when people are thinking and talking, not when you're lecturing.

33. If possible, it helps for people to be able to read the questions, not just hear them.

34. Ask open ended questions.

If you've been provided questions and they are not open-ended, rewrite them! A question like, "Do you think Peter was right in doing that?" will lead to an answer like, "No" and will not create a conversation. So, instead ask, "What's a better way Peter could have handled this situation?" or "Why do you think Peter acted like he did?" or "When have you been in a situation like Peter's, and how did you respond?"

35. When you ask a question, expect silence.

It will feel like forever but in reality three or four seconds is fine. Wait patiently. People need time to process the question and formulate an answer. They may need time to muster up the courage to talk out loud. Be comfortable with the silence.

36. If no one speaks, even after you allow silence, you will be tempted to give the answer to your question. Don't do it!

Ask the question again, but in a different way. Rephrase it, which gives people more time to continue thinking, and the new way you're asking it may lead to an answer they hadn't come up with.

37. Don't get in the habit of giving the final answer at the end of each question's discussion.

If you do, it will seem like there was a "right" answer you were waiting for and, since no one gave it, you are.

38. You can occasionally share your thoughts and opinions, but don't be the person who talks most.

39. Speaking of that person who talks the most:

If the amount they talk is reasonable and not an issue, great. However, if you have someone who is ALWAYS the first person to answer the questions without giving others a chance ~ this is a drag! You may want to try, when you ask a question, saying something like, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't talked yet." Another strategy is to talk to the person outside of group and say something like, "I love how much you participate. I wish everyone felt as comfortable sharing with the group as you do. But some people don't. For some people it's difficult to talk. Will you help me with something? Actually, I wanted to ask you to partner with me in helping other people to participate more. If you can not be the first person to answer the questions, just kind of hold back, that will give the more quiet people more of a chance to get their nerve up and say what they're thinking, instead of taking the easy way out and just letting you and I talk."

40. And, speaking of the people who won't talk:

One way, again, to try to engage them is to say, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't shared yet." After your group has been meeting awhile and you feel confident it won't freak them out, you can even ask them a question directly, "Sally, what are you thinking? Seems like you might have an idea you want to share..." You may also want to encourage that person outside of group, "I love it when you share. You have such good things to say."

41. Prepare for the group time.

Read the MeetUp sheet/questions beforehand and think through the conversations you want to have. But remember, you don't need to have all the answers, and should not give all the answers.

42. If you have a leader's guide you're using, don't feel compelled to ask every question. Pick and choose as you feel comfortable.

If the conversation is great and means you won't be able to get through all the questions, that's fine.

43. Try different types of group strategies:

- a. Video Driven – “talking head” style.
- b. Video Driven – “cinematic” style, like The End Of Me or God For The Rest Of Us.
- c. Pick a Paper of the book and read through it together.

Tips related to making your group not be all about you:

44. If you have someone with some potential, let him (or her) try leading.

Give a bit of coaching beforehand (you could even use this article) and encourage them to give it a shot. Celebrate if they are even better at leading than you are!

45. Encourage your group to meet in your absence.

If they don't, it gives the impression the group cannot exist without you. If you don't have anyone who is ready to lead a Jesus discussion, then have the group meet for a game night, or to go out for ice cream, or watch a movie.

46. Eventually get the group out of your house.

Someone else being the host will make the group less centered on you. You might try moving it to a different home every few months.

Some final tips:

47. You're going to have to figure out the “kid issue.”

Depending on the age and the amount of kids you may need to provide babysitting. I've done babysitting in the same house as the small group (but in a different room) and in a different nearby house. With older kids who can safely entertain themselves, you may not need babysitting. Having group members bring their children will help their kids grow up making God and Jesus a priority!

48. Remember that your ultimate goal is to build deep, intentional community with each other, all centered around growing faith in God and Jesus.

49. Pray for your group regularly!

This has to be a God thing.

50. Have your group pray for God's will for the group!

Encourage everyone to pray for each other daily. Overwhelmed? Don't be! These are just tips, not rules. Every group is unique. That being said, all groups have room to improve, so hopefully you've pinpointed a couple of tips that can help yours!