

The following article is located at: <https://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2015/5-mistakes-that-ruin-small-groups.html>

SmallGroups.com, February, 2015

ARTICLE

## 5 Mistakes that Ruin Small Groups

How to be an intentional small-group leader

Carter Moss | posted February 23, 2015



When I finished leading the third week of my new small group, it hit me—I really enjoy leading small groups. It's such a privilege. We get such a unique front-row seat to watch new friendships forming, people pushing themselves out of long-standing comfort zones, and God slowly but steadily transforming people's lives.

I always want leading a small group to be part of my life. And I want to keep getting better leading. A big key to improving in our leadership skills is learning from mistakes—both our own, and others'. Let's examine a few of the most common mistakes small-group leaders make and do some self-assessment to see whether we fall into these traps:

### 1. Allowing an Unsafe Environment

For small groups to be as impactful in people's lives, the conversations must move below the surface into deeper sharing. This allows the relationships to grow in authenticity. But this absolutely cannot happen if the group is unsafe. If it's not safe to share—people won't.

Unfortunately it's easy to let the group drift into an unsafe environment. If group members share something personal and confidential, and then hear their story told by someone not in group—the group becomes an unsafe place for sharing. The response within the group to sharing can also make the group feel unsafe. For instance, if a group member shares an honest struggle and the responses from others are full of advice-giving, criticism, and disagreement, the group member will second-guess sharing the future. Or if a group member gets emotional while sharing and others in the group don't respond in helpful ways, the group member will likely shut down.

Leaders, it's up to us to create a safe environment for sharing. We have to consistently remind our group members to keep what's shared confidential and to give space for people to open up and be vulnerable (and yes, even cry sometimes). It's up to us to ensure that group members are getting better at listening without always giving advice, turning the conversation toward their own story, or being dismissive and trite. And even though it can feel biblical, we can't let people resort to piling on Christian platitudes and throwing verses at people who are trying to share honest struggles.

Often our best response in those moments can be, "We're so sorry that happened to you" and "Is it okay if we pause and pray for you right now?" When someone shares openly, I like to respond with, "Thanks so much for being vulnerable and sharing that. It's so important for our authentic relationships and it inspires others to share." People desperately need safe places in their lives, places where they can be "real." Your small group could be the only safe place some people have—if you work on making it safe.

### 2. Moving at the Wrong Speed

Finding the right study for your group can be tricky, but it's not the only thing to consider. We also need to learn how to move at the right pace through the study. Whether you're reading straight from the Bible and discussing it, or working your way through a purchased curriculum, it's important to move at a speed that allows group members to process the information and put it into practice.

I was in a men's group once where we were studied two verses from Romans a week. Though there is a lot to discuss in Romans, our pace felt too slow and even a bit repetitive. On the other hand, I've been in groups where the leader's number one priority was to

complete all of the curriculum for the night. Even if there was great discussion beginning on a particular question, we had to cut it short and move on so we could get through every question in the curriculum.

We need to avoid both of these pitfalls. Our top priority should never be simply to complete the curriculum. The study is merely a vehicle to help start discussions where people can process the truths of God. So if there is a week where the discussion is getting so engaging and deep on the first or second question, feel free to spend the whole night there and not rush it along. Those moments don't come often, so take advantage of it. Just be careful not to slip into doing this every single week, or people will start to feel like you'll let any tangent take them off track, and they'll wonder if you'll ever complete the study.

One more caveat: sometimes God just has a different agenda for your group meeting. I've had nights where I was all prepared for a discussion on our study, and group members show up with something major on their hearts, and they need the whole night to process the situation with close friends. Other times, I could look around the room and know that everyone was fried and had no mental capacity to have a deep discussion, so we kept things lighter so they could vent or laugh or just get their minds off of their tough situations for a little while. We have to stay open to what the Spirit of God is doing in our group. It's always best when we let him lead!

### 3. Getting Together Only for Meetings

As small-group leaders, we typically focus the majority of our time and energy on making the group meetings as effective as possible. And that's a good thing. But the danger can be that we let that be *all* the group is about. If the meeting becomes the only interaction the group ever has, we're dangerously close to our small group becoming just a class or a program.

While the group meetings are incredibly important, so much of the relationship building and "doing life together" happens outside of those group meetings. People are busy, though, and relational intentionality can slip through the cracks. As leaders, we need to help make this happen. You don't need to own all of the social interactions for your group, but it's good to "go first" by modeling it and consistently talking about it.

The key is to find what's natural for your group, so it doesn't feel like more forced, programmed interactions. I love movies, so for me it's always been easy to get people together to see a new movie in the theater or gather at someone's house for a movie night. I've seen families with young kids getting together at a park or McDonald's Playland so the kids can play while the parents talk. It's always fun to host a BBQ or have one or two other couples over for dinner.

I like to initiate a few group activities outside the meeting time, but I love seeing group members start getting together on their own. It's a huge win when group members initiate hanging out with a few others from the group—even when I'm not invited! And the bonus is that all these non-meeting hangouts will end up making the group meetings even more relational and impactful.

### 4. Killing the Group Discussion

As leaders, we desire to see healthy, engaging discussions, yet often this is a challenge. While some of this depends on the personalities of your group members, there are definitely some simple things we can do to help ensure great discussions. Here are a few tips:

#### **Don't be the first one to answer.**

I always make it a rule—and even tell the group ahead of time—that I'm going to try to be the last person to answer the question. I even let them know I'm okay with awkward silences if they don't have anything to say at first. This encourages group members to answer and not wait for me to give them the answer.

#### **Ask open-ended questions.**

It's hard to get any discussion when questions require only a yes/no, agree/disagree, or true/false answer. If you're stuck with those kinds of questions, a great follow-up question that always works is "Why? What makes you answer that way?"

#### **Ask follow-up questions.**

Get in the habit of always asking follow-up questions, especially when people try to give a really short answer. There are all sorts of great follow-up questions you can use, like "Does that come easy or hard to you? Why?" and "When have you seen this truth play out in your own life?" and "What do you think is the biggest barrier to living that out?"

### **Pick some fights.**

If I'm having trouble getting discussion going, I'll sometimes tell group members that I'm going to play devil's advocate and push back on their answers. Or I'll ask a more provocative question. Instead of asking, "What did Jesus call his disciples to go do?" I might ask, "Why would Jesus trust these guys when they didn't earn it? Wouldn't it just be easier to do himself? Is it worth the risk?" Another standby I love to use is "How would you explain this to a non-Christian who doesn't buy it?"

## 5. Sticking Together Too Long

This could be the most common mistake of all—and for good reason, because it's probably the toughest. If building authentic relationships is the goal, how does multiplying a group fit in?

Sometimes a small group will stay together with all the same members for years, even decades, and it can feel like a great thing because the group possess relational depth. But in the end, it can actually be tragic.

When we stick together too long, we deny this authentic community experience to others. Nobody in the group gets the opportunity to develop into a leader. The group members become stuck in their comfort zones and forget the importance of welcoming and loving new people, losing any missional focus. Group members lose the opportunity to hear fresh perspectives on God's Word from new people.

Throughout Scripture, God consistently commands his people to multiply. Jesus himself left this command as his final great commission in [Matthew 28](#) and [Acts 1:8](#). It's a non-negotiable. Healthy things are meant to grow. As our small groups grow as we invite and include more and more people, we have the opportunity to multiply and create new groups so even more people can experience this kind of community and life change.

Multiplication doesn't need to kill the deep relationships and community that a group is experiencing because there are lots of different ways to multiply a group. A group can become a place where future small-group leaders are invited in, developed, and then sent off. Or groups can send off just one or two couples together that have some sort of affinity (maybe geographic or life-stage) to multiply a new group.

I have multiplied my small groups many times. And while people always fear it at first, they end up excited about it and cheering it on. How? I constantly remind them of the reason for it. From the beginning of the group, I cast vision for multiplication. When we send off group members to start a new group, we lay hands on them, pray for them, and commission them. After the new group has started, I like to find ways to get the multiplied groups to gather together again for "reunions."

## Self-Assessment

Have you made these common mistakes? Leaders must be intentional about fostering the right kind of environment for groups and building healthy relationships. Without intentionality, we'll easily slip into these mistakes. But when we're proactive, we can see God do powerful things through our groups.

*—Carter Moss is a Campus Pastor and Life Groups Director for Newbreak Church, a large multi-site church in San Diego, and an advisor for [SmallGroups.com](#).*