

ARTICLE

Help! My Small Group Has Been Hijacked!

Four common ways your small group gets derailed and how to respond

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Note: This article has been excerpted from [Leading 101](#).

Have you ever led a small-group meeting that got out of control? Your material was received well, group members were engaged, and then one person started dominating the group. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn't stop this person from controlling the group. Before you knew it, your small group had been hijacked. Small-group hijackers can do a great deal of harm. Here are four different hijacker personalities and how to deal with them:

The Talking Hijacker

This is the person who answers every question before anyone else can respond. While most of the participants are still pondering the question, the talking hijacker is spurting out a response. Though you may be grateful for the liveliness and contributions, the talking hijacker leaves the group with a sense that no one else has a chance to respond. Instead of drawing other people out, the talking hijacker makes people want to withdraw. What needs to be said after it feels like everything has already been said?

Taking Control from the Talking Hijacker

First, try to pull to the person aside one-on-one. Thank the person for their gracious contributions, but be honest about the need for others to contribute. Encourage the person to only to respond to every other or every third question and keep responses short. Or, encourage the person to allow two or three other people to share before sharing. You may even want to solicit the talking hijacker's help in getting other people to talk in the group by asking questions, but be careful because this can backfire.

If the talking hijackers still can't help themselves, you may need to highly structure your discussion time for a while. Set up this ground rule for the next lesson: you'll be calling on specific people to respond to questions. This will encourage the quieter person while deterring the talkative one. If you still can't resolve the issue, another creative idea is to cut out small squares of paper. If you have ten questions you want to discuss and five people in your small group, cut out 15 squares so every group member receives three. Each time a member speaks they are required to turn in one piece of paper. When they are out of squares, they're no longer allowed to speak until everybody else uses up theirs. You might also require people to raise a hand to be called on so it becomes physically apparent to the talking hijacker just how much they're talking.

The Emotional Hijacker

This small-group member shows up every week with an emotional crisis. Before you know it, the majority of the meeting is spent trying to unravel the problem and soothe the person's emotional needs. Instead of focusing on Scripture or prayer, the majority of time and energy is spent on the Emotional Hijacker.

Taking Control from the Emotional Hijacker

One way to deal with an Emotional Hijacker is to take the person out to coffee or lunch. Once this person has space to share everything going on in life, he or she may not need as much of the small group's time to share. Spending more one-on-one time may also allow you to better understand the person's needs. Depending on the situation, you may be able to suggest a spiritual mentor or Christian counselor. At the next gathering, if the person tries to hijack the group with another crisis, inform the small group that the purpose of the meeting needs to focus on the study at hand and prayer requests will be taken at the end of the meeting. This will allow you to get through the material and still allow the person to share within a more limited time constraint.

The Leader Hijacker

This hijacker is like a back-seat driver that gives you constant directions on how to best lead the group. The Leader Hijacker assumes he or she has the best approach to leading and frequently mentions past leadership positions. The other members don't know who to listen to: you or the hijacker.

Taking Control from the Leader Hijacker

Talking directly with the Leader Hijacker will take courage, but it's the quickest way to a result. Sift through his or her comments to see if you can glean anything helpful. Sometimes there will be good suggestions that can benefit the group. If so, mention these helpful suggestions in your conversation, which will keep the atmosphere positive. Tell how you appreciate his or her willingness to share leadership skills and then politely ask the Leader Hijacker to stop doing so at the small-group meetings. Let the Leader Hijacker know that sharing these things during the meeting promotes disunity in the group. Affirm the hijacker by asking for input (at a one-on-one meeting) when you feel you need it, and by offering to listen to suggestions outside of meetings. At the same time, confirm that you are leading in a way that suits your personality and leadership style, noting that it may be different from the hijacker's. If the hijacker makes another comment in a group meeting, respond by saying: "Let's talk about that suggestion outside of the group meeting."

The Late Hijacker

Without fail, this person walks into the small-group meeting late. You've spent 20 minutes building momentum toward a specific point, and right before you ask the most important question the Late Hijacker bursts in. The entrance disrupts the group, and you can't get the group's attention again. The momentum and focus are lost.

Taking Control from the Late Hijacker

Approach the Late Hijacker privately and encourage this person to make a better effort to be on time. Explain how it's hard to get the group refocused once everybody is distracted. If the person can't get there any earlier, encourage them to enter more quietly and sensitively. If the mood seems somber, wait a few minutes before entering so distraction won't be an issue. If the Late Hijacker doesn't stop, you may want to consider encouraging the person to find another small group that fits in his or her schedule better.

—Margaret Feinberg has written several books and accompanying DVD studies including [The Organic God](#), [The Sacred Echo](#), [Scouting the Divine](#), and [Pursuing God's Love](#). For more on Margaret, visit her website: www.margaretfeinberg.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you encountered these hijackers? What, if anything, did you do?
2. Do you have any of these hijackers in your current group? If so, create a plan for taking control from them.
3. Who can you go to for support in this matter? A coach? A director? Another leader?