

Critical Questions: 10 Tips for Leading a Small Group

Written by Sydney Penner

Leading a small group is not always as easy as it may seem, and often comes with little to no practical training. These are just a few tips that I have picked up along my journey as a youth leader, and will hopefully save you from learning some of them the hard way.

1) Don't be afraid to say "I don't know"

As a youth leader in a position of authority, it can be tempting to try to look like you have all the answers. Some days it can be hard to get your students to engage with the most elementary concepts, then other days you get bombarded with the most theologically complex questions even your pastor would struggle to answer. While it's important to encourage curiosity, trying to fake your way through tough questions can often do more harm than good. More than having all the answers, it is important to show your students you are still a human struggling through the same life as everyone else. Don't be afraid to admit you don't have all the answers, and that sometimes that is ok.

2) Readjust your standard of success and meet your students where they're at

Just this year I ended up switching small groups from grade 10/11 girls, to grade 7/8 girls, and I remember feeling totally lost on how to reach these students. I went from having mature conversations to praying that my girls would sit still through the opening announcements. People change a lot between the ages of 12-18, so in order to best interact with your students you must meet them where they're at and set realistic expectations for your small group. For me that looked like realizing that one thoughtful question or bringing a friend to youth group was progress for my small group. Naturally, we expect everyone to see the world the way we do, but that's just not how it works. Instead of getting frustrated by where you think your small group should be, reevaluate what they need and look for the progress that's already happening.

3) Be consistent

Looking back on my own experience in youth group, what I remember the most is the people who were committed to walking along side me throughout my years in the program. Some I lost contact with along the way, and others I still consider to be mentors today. Often having the right answers and saying the right things can feel like the best way to reach your students, but experience has shown me time and time again that so much of youth ministry is building relationships. One critical way any youth leader can grow in their connection with their small group is by being a consistent influence in their life. Although you may only get once or twice a week to build those relationships, being a constant in a student's life is the best way to have a positive influence in their lives.

4) Look for the outsider

As a youth leader, there will naturally be students that you gravitate towards. They will likely be the teens who engage in conversation, who are willing to help out, and who are just fun to be around. While it's not wrong to enjoy spending time with some more than others, it is super important to acknowledge and invest in ALL the students you are leading. There's a good

chance you won't have the same depth of relationship with everyone in your small group, but your students will notice if they feel they are being neglected. So much of being a youth leader is about building relationships, so be intentional about making sure everyone in your small group feels seen and valued.

5) Encourage leadership

Another tip for leading a small group is recognizing who has influence in your group, and using them to sway the culture. Anyone who's lead a small group knows the kind of dysfunction that makes you want to rip your hair out. While these nights will happen and won't always go your way, identifying who it is in your group that dictates the dynamic and then encouraging them in leadership can drastically change how you lead your small group. Rather than being a dictator shouting commands, come alongside your student and use those who show leadership potential to peer lead with you. There will be times where you need to play your authority card and rally your group, but for the most part engaging with your group rather than standing above them is the best way to earn respect and lead effectively.

6) Be intentional, inside and outside of a youth night

This tip goes beyond a youth night, and is for youth leaders that are interested in intentionally mentoring their students. I found that often during a youth night I am encouraged by the conversations I have with my students, until the next week rolls around and their entire lives have changed. There is only so much depth of relationship that can happen for two hours once a week, which is why checking in outside of a youth night can be critical for your relationships with your small group. Regardless, relationships will build over time, but going out of your way to meet them in their playing field can help show them that you are interested in intentionally investing in their lives and are not just a familiar face once a week. Connecting with a student outside of a youth night will communicate that you are in it for the long hall.

7) Lead by example and recognize your influence

In addition to building relationships with your students, leading by example is another key way to bring about positive change in your small group. Although your students might not show it, you do have an incredible influence on their lives. As humans, we naturally model those we look up to and respect the most, so it is only a matter of time until your small group starts applying what you are teaching them with your actions. The fact is that your students are watching what you're doing, the choice is up to you what they will see and model. With this understanding it is critical that you take responsibility for the influence you have over these young lives, and try your best to model the lessons you are teaching. So be aware of the influence you have and be intentional about leading by example.

8) Be a confidant, not a parent

When I first stepped into a leadership role in my youth group, I quickly came to realize how overwhelming it can feel to have the lives of teenagers placed in your hands. I constantly felt like I wasn't doing enough, because I couldn't control how they chose to live their lives. Somewhere along the line I came to more clearly understand that my role a youth leader was not to be a parent, but was to be a confidant. Being a youth leader does not mean that you are

responsible for the lively hood of these young people, but it means being committed to listening, accepting, supporting, and walking alongside your small group. There will be students that you will see measurable growth in, but there will also be those that fall away from God, or disappear altogether. It is so important to recognize the boundaries of your role, and then trust that God is working in the lives of your students in more ways than you can see.

9) Be present and focused

Students pick up on more than we realize, and they will notice if we are not genuinely engaged on a youth night. Youth group should be crazy fun for both the leaders and the students, but it is important to make sure that we don't put our enjoyment above being a present leader. Youth leaders exist to intentionally invest in the lives of their students, and walk alongside them in their faith. This might mean sacrificing hanging out with fellow leaders on a youth night in order to spend quality time with your youth kids. Youth leading should be fun, but it also means sometimes sacrificing what you want for the benefit of those you're leading.

10) Don't be afraid to have fun

Similar to readjusting your measure of success, don't underestimate the importance of having fun. As I pound this point to death, youth ministry is about community and nothing brings people together like letting loose and having a good time. As a mentor I catch myself looking for as many avenues as possible to initiate deep conversation with my students, but constantly have to remind myself that relationship must come first. Just having fun together as a group will build trust and closeness and it is from there, with time that those thought-provoking conversations will naturally come. Don't try to force depth, but invest in your relationships by having fun together.