The Difference Between Leading In-Person and Virtual Small Groups

Virtual small groups now offer local ministries an opportunity to reach across the world and connect with people who might not otherwise be part of a growth group. We believe virtual groups can be very effective tools for discipleship (though not quite as effective as in-person groups) and having participants from various parts of the world can be invigorating. However, leaders need to be prepared for a few differences. Before listing those, here are a few dynamic group leadership principles that are still at play in virtual groups.

1. A leader who talks a lot discourages participation, but a leader who asks open-ended questions and then endures any silence that follows invites open dialogue among the group.

2. Group guidelines (like honoring one another's confidentiality and not giving unwanted advice) help create a climate of safety and trust – both of which are crucial for vulnerability and open sharing. But beyond simply informing group members of the guidelines, good leaders find the courage to gently point out guideline tresspasses. They do so first after the meeting, in private (e.g., "Hey, John, I love your contributions to the group, but I've noticed others aren't getting time to talk. I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind being brief with your comments and maybe giving others more time to jump in?"). Then, if necessary, they will handle it during the group and then shift the conversion forward. For example, "Sarah, I see your care for David, but please wait for people to ask for suggestions before you make them. Thanks. Who else has a thought about this passage?"

3. Active leaders ask lots of questions (and teach very little), "push" the topic to the other side of the circle so conversation gains momentum, and they keep the dialogue rolling by quickly acknowledging a comment and then bouncing it right back to the group (e.g., "That's insightful Jerry. Who else here can relate to that?"). And when asking a probing personal question, they share with vulnerability *first* in order to encourage others to do the same.

4. Commenting on non-verbals is an effective way of getting beneath the surface (e.g., "Shannon, you look a bit burdened tonight and you're more quiet than usual. I'm wondering what's on your heart?").

Virtual Group Leadership Principles & Dynamics That Differ:

1. Guidelines are equally important in virtual groups, but sometimes group members need tips on virtual and technical codes of conduct. For example, for the first few sessions tell the group as you begin that if loud noises come through their open mic that you will mute them if necessary. And ask them not to "multi-task" during the group; it can be very distracting for someone to be getting up and down or doing other things while the group is trying to share. And, of course, you might have to help some members know how to mute their mic, camera, etc.

2. Leaders should try to be as "large" as they can be within their video feed. Sitting too far back from the camera makes it hard for people to hear you or take you seriously. Pro Tip: Don't angle your camera up in such a way that it leaves a lot of "head space", i.e., space between the top of your head and the video image; angle the camera so that there's just a little space above your head.

3. Greeting individual people is different. In-person groups allow you to greet them personally at the door with a handshake or hug; virtual greetings are public and everyone hears what you say to each person. All of this makes it more challenging to connect with new people, to get to know them as individuals, and to earn their trust. Taking the time before or after the first meeting to personally connect with each group member by video call, text, or phone is very helpful in building a connection.

4. New attendees are more reluctant to speak up in virtual groups. There's something about being "on camera" that is unnerving to some. It's helpful if leaders normalize this by giving people permission to "take their time" in sharing with the group while also communicating that "we expect everyone to jump in eventually". Give people time to find their courage. If they remain silent, you can prompt them by asking them a direct question (e.g., "Rodrigo, I'm wondering what your thoughts are?").

5. In our experience, it takes a little longer to get the conversation going in virtual groups. Patience is needed and don't be afraid of silence (if you fill the silence by talking, the group has trained *you* to answer your own questions).

6. Body language. With in-person groups, a leader can command attention by quickly leaning forward in their chair; they can also deflect attention away from themselves and back to the people by asking a question and leaning back in their chair. Gaining attention is more difficult in virtual environments; you can try to lean into your camera or raise your voice. And because you have less non-verbal behavior to observe, it's easier for people to fool you with an "I'm fine" face, when they really aren't.

7. Virtual rooms are easier to launch because you don't have to find a location (or room at the church) that works for everyone. But that also means people can attend from anywhere, which causes distractions. It's harder to corral the attention of your members if someone is driving, if young children are in the room, or if someone is walking around their house doing laundry. (Maybe you should have group guidelines about this?)

8. Side conversations. For some reason, people feel the freedom to have side conversations with someone at their home. They would never have such a dialogue if they were in-person, but they may do so in a virtual environment. Communicate your expectations about this and ask them to go on mute

(camera and mic) if they must have the conversation.

(9) In theory, virtual groups can be much larger than in-person groups, but we suggest that you limit groups to the usual max size of 15 (including you). Beyond that, the group drifts away from being interactional and shifts to a "class" with you doing all the talking.

(10) There's something about the virtual climate that naturally shifts people to a "teacher-class" dynamic; this will stifle conversation and group sharing. So, encourage people to talk to one another, not just you. The power of small groups comes in part from everyone participating and responding to one another. A great group has communication that "bounces around the room"; strive for that kind of environment virtually as well. (Pro Tip: Allowing for silence after a question or comment encourages a lively discussion.)

(11) Consider creating a group text (or app like GroupMe) for between session connection, reminders, and encouragement.

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