

## Leading a Small Group: Designing the Right Environment

A key element to every group is the mood or tone. What happens apart from the content helps to enhance (or sometimes destroy) your group members' experiences. Some good groups have been hindered by poor environment. Other groups seem to soar, partly because of a comfortable environment.

### *Betsy's Snapshot*

The first Bible study I went to was pretty good considering I expected the leader to be stuffy. She turned out to be really fun. The study was so interesting that I completely forgot about the biology midterm I had the next day. The warm brownies made up for me missing dinner. I even found myself talking about things I've never shared before. I was really encouraged to walk with God after that and couldn't wait until our next meeting.

### **Jesus knew the influence of the environment in learning**

He taught about the resurrection outside the tomb of Lazarus and about His identity amid the natural beauty of Caesarea Philippi. He taught them about prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, about faith in a boat, righteous anger in the temple, and evangelism beside a dusty well in a Samaritan village. Each change in environment brought an opportunity to teach another truth.

Think about the atmosphere you'll be creating in your small group. **Ask yourself:**

- What can I do to communicate to my group this is a safe place for them to come?
- How can I help people be as comfortable as possible?
- How do I minimize obstacles and distractions?
- What conditions will produce the best learning?

### **Bad Environments for Small Groups**

- Your roommate's "Naughty Cheerleaders of the Big Ten" poster makes the guys drool like leaky faucets.
- The phone rings regularly during the group. When it does, everyone stops talking and listens to the person talking on the phone.
- The guys in your afternoon Bible study nod lethargically after coming down from a sugar high brought on by a lunch of Snickers and Jolt Cola.



- Your roommate keeps coming in every five minutes, saying, "I just need to grab one more thing, and I promise I won't bother you again."
- Aerosmith rehearses in the room above you.
- Your idea of a fun snack is pimentos stuffed into zucchini wedges so it looks like a mini-watermelon slice.
- The room is so dark and musty that sewer workers regularly walk through wearing those lighted helmets.
- The room gets so hot that sometimes the members of your Bible study literally become on fire for the Lord.

Developing the right environment helps to establish a sense of belonging. For instance, a classroom setting might be too sterile and cold. But if you meet in a comfortable dorm room or apartment, the group will feel more relaxed and at home. The environment will influence how people feel about your group, how well they learn, and if they will come back.

#### *Randy's Snapshot*

I remember the first small group meeting I attended. There was a guy named John, but I never really got to know him because he always sat on his loft. All I saw was the bottom of his Nikes. No one talked. The leader seemed like his mind was on the Bulls' game blaring from the TV in the corner. I was always thinking, How can I get out of this? When the phone rang, I wanted it to be my roommate with some "emergency" which only I could take care of. The material the leader gave made great doodling paper. I could hardly wait to get out of there.

#### **Here are some keys to creating a good environment:**

- **Meet in an informal and accessible location.** Often a great place to meet is in the room of a group member as long as it's OK with their roommates. Places such as a church may intimidate new group members. Likewise, classrooms may be familiar and accessible, but they hinder communication and warmth.

#### *Mark's Snapshot*

The University of North Carolina is a beautiful, sprawling campus, but it's also a 25 minute walk over hilly terrain from end to end. When I wanted to start a Bible study we used a survey to find fifty guys who were interested. I had this brilliant idea of how to save time and make the Bible study more convenient for me. I didn't have the time to visit all these guys, so I just dropped notes in their mailboxes. I set the meeting for 8 on Sunday night because that's when I had free time. I also thought it would be most convenient to meet in a classroom close by. Boy, was I wrong. When I showed up the first week I found I had also saved a lot of other people time: only three of the fifty guys showed up that night. I talked to



Shannon, my leader, and he helped me take a different approach. That next week we visited many of the fifty students and changed the meeting time to a weekday. Plus we moved the location to a meeting room in their residence hall. I was encouraged when fifteen guys showed up. I learned my lesson to make things convenient for the guys, not me.

- **Set your meeting time so that all members are able to attend.** Choose a time when your members are likely to be sharp and awake and make sure no one has an ongoing schedule conflict. Friday afternoons and late nights are better for blowing off steam or sleeping than for a small group meeting.
- **Arrange the seating so everyone can easily see one another.** Sitting in a circle at the same level will help. Also be aware of the distance separating each member. Try to sit close enough so each person has eye contact and can hear one another easily, but not so close people feel uncomfortable or their personal space is being invaded.
- **Meet in a location where you can control distractions and interruptions as much as possible.** Unplug the phone or turn on the answering machine. Put a sign on the door so no one will knock. Turn off the TV. It's also not a good idea to meet in a room where outside noise can interfere with your group.
- **Provide refreshments** (especially important the first few weeks) to help warm up the group and give people something to do at the beginning of the meeting.

*Susan's Snapshot*

I was leading a sorority Bible study at Clemson. It was our first study and I wanted to make the women feel special, so I made a pie. About 10 minutes after eating her slice, one of the women in the study started grabbing her stomach saying, "I don't feel so good." She ran from the room and threw up. I found out later it was something else she ate earlier, but the girls must have been thinking, *What is this woman giving us?*

- **Make sure you have good lighting to create a warm feeling.** No one should have to look into the sun or toward a bright window. Likewise, avoid dark, catacomb-type rooms. You are developing fellowship, not film.
- **Choose a location where you can freely interact and carry out the content of your small group plan.** Make sure you have any equipment you may need. If you would like to sing during your group time, meet in a private location.
- **Bring extra Bibles.** Some group members may forget to bring one or won't have a readable translation.

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