

TIPS FOR GUIDING A GROUP CONVERSATION

Here are a few tips that will help you successfully guide a group conversation:



- **Model the behavior and attitudes you want group members to employ.** That includes respecting all group members equally; demonstrating what it means to be a learner (admitting when you're wrong, or don't know a fact or an answer, and suggesting ways to find out); asking questions based on others' statements; focusing on positions rather than on the speaker; listening carefully; restating others' points; supporting your arguments with fact or logic; acknowledging when someone else has a good point; accepting criticism; thinking critically; giving up the floor when appropriate; being sensitive to others, etc.
- **Use encouraging body language and tone of voice, as well as words.** Lean forward when people are talking, for example, keep your body position open and approachable, smile when appropriate, and attend carefully to everyone, not just to those who are most articulate.
- **Give positive feedback for joining the discussion.** Smile, repeat group members' points, and otherwise show that you value participation.
- **Be aware of people's reactions and feelings, and try to respond appropriately.** Be willing to help the group navigate both confusion and conflict. Being aware of the reactions of individuals and of the group as a whole can make it possible to expose and use conflict, or to head off unnecessary emotional situations and misunderstandings.
- **Ask open-ended questions. In advancing the discussion, use questions that can't be answered with a simple yes or no.** Instead, questions should require some thought from group members, and should ask for answers that include reasons or analysis. The difference between "Do you think Joshua's decision was right?" and "Why do you think Joshua's decision was or wasn't right?" is huge. Where the first question can be answered with a yes or no, the second requires an analysis supporting the speaker's opinion, as well as discussion of the context and reasons for the decision.
- **Encourage disagreement, and help the group use it creatively.** Disagreement is not to be smoothed over, but rather to be analyzed and used. When there are conflicting opinions – especially when both can be backed up by reasonable arguments – the real discussion starts. If everyone agrees on every point, there's really no discussion at all. Disagreement makes people think. It may not be resolved in one session, or at all, but it's the key to discussion that means something.
- **Don't let one or a small group of individuals dominate the discussion.** People who are particularly articulate or assertive, who have strong feelings that they urgently want to express, or who simply feel the need – and have the ability – to dominate can take up far more than their fair share of a discussion. This often means that quieter people have little or no chance to speak, and that those who disagree with the dominant individual(s) are shouted down and cease trying to make points. It's up to the leader to cut off individuals who take far more than their share of time, or who try to limit discussion. This can be done in a relatively non-threatening way ("This is an interesting point, and it's certainly worth the time we've spent on it, but there are other points of view that need to be heard as well. I think Alice has been waiting to speak..."), but it's crucial to the open process and to the comfort and effectiveness of the group.
- **Don't be the font of all wisdom.** Even if you know more about the discussion topic than most others in the group (if you're the teacher of a class, for instance), presenting yourself as the intellectual authority denies group members the chance to discuss the topic freely and without pressure. Furthermore, some of them may have ideas you haven't considered, or experiences that give them insights into the topic that you're never likely to have. Model learning behavior, not teaching behavior.