

Engaging Groups: How to Spark Connection instead of Suffering

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When we get together to accomplish something with a group, our busy lives can drive us to focus only on efficiently getting to the goal. But these gatherings also offer opportunities to build connections and relationships. By planning the group's time in a way that emphasizes process as well as outcome, you can increase participants' engagement in the task at hand and also arrive at stronger outcomes.

Getting Started

- Use a room set up that allows people to see one another (if possible).
- Welcome people and introduce yourself to individuals as they arrive.
- Try to make names visible to all, not just to the instructor (double-sided if name tents).
- Have people introduce themselves in small groups to any extent time allows.

Promoting Participation and Interaction

- Get participants interacting with one another within the first 15 minutes. When the beginning of a meeting or class is dominated by one-way communication from the group leader, people settle in to listen rather than contribute.
- Ask participants to process a question or topic in small groups before posing it to the full group. This is especially important for introverts and for those who may be concerned about their level of knowledge with the topic.
- Start with a reflective question about individual perspectives or experiences to minimize the importance of expertise.
- In the full group, politely rein in people who are talking too much ("I need to stop you there. I want to make sure we have time to hear from others") or let them know why you're not calling on them ("I see you have a comment, but I want to give some space to those who haven't had a chance to chime in yet").
- If it's a series of meetings, ask participants what worked and what could be changed for next time—and then work to honor their feedback.

General Dos and Don'ts

- **Don't minimize or dismiss anyone's contribution. Ever.** You can note that it's not quite where you want the group to focus at the moment, or ask them to rephrase, or to highlight where it connects to the topic, or note that it echoes what others have said, or even just say thanks before you reframe the question to remind people of the focus. But if you dismiss someone's comment, you won't likely get them back. If you shut two people down, you'll kill everyone's willingness to contribute to the group conversation.
- **Do** reflect on your demeanor. Are you presenting yourself as someone happy to be there and open to the process? Or as a hurried expert who has other things to do?
- **Do** use multiple modes of communication for giving discussion prompts, i.e., oral and written. Check in to make sure the question you've posed makes sense.
- **Do** ask participants to make sure everyone has a chance to talk when you have them discuss in small groups.
- **Do** be okay with waiting a bit if there's silence when you ask for comments or ideas.

What you can do as a participant

If you find yourself trapped in a group process that is either not allowing for or eliciting much participation, here are some options for intervening to get others involved. *The key here is to use the suggestions below in a way that does not challenge the leader's approach or expertise.*

- Focus on your own confusion, concern, or need for clarity:
 - "Here's what I think I'm hearing, but I'm not sure I can picture how that would work. Can others chime in with some examples of what they've done?"
 - "I'm new to this issue so I may be off base here, but I'm concerned this option misses part of the audience. I'd like to hear from others about whether using this approach makes sense in their situations?"
- When a group is gathering for a second time after a very lecture-y first meeting, especially if it appears the leader wanted/wants interaction but isn't getting it:
 - Speak with the leader individually to see if there would be time for people to introduce themselves/check-in on the issue/pose questions/etc.
 - Following this, if you feel it's needed, you can note that you're more comfortable speaking up if you know something about those who are present with you. Or that you've learned that people will often share their views in a small group but not with the big group so that might be helpful to get more perspectives. Or whatever other reason you sense might resonate with the leader.

Other Strategies