

Three Levels of Small-Group Problems

Different problems require different strategies.

By Heather Zempel

My husband and I purchased a house recently, and it got me thinking: Do you ever wish you could just put your small group on the market and let some new leader deal with the problems? If you've never felt this way, then you probably haven't been leading for very long.

If you lead a small group, you *will* encounter problems. There's no way around it. When you deal with people, it gets messy. These problems can range from the fairly benign (people won't talk in my group) to the very serious (someone has threatened suicide). That isn't to scare you—it's to equip you.

When faced with a problem, it's important to identify the type and severity of the problem, and then determine the next course of action. Different levels of problems require different strategies.

Level 1 Problems

Level 1 problems will be encountered in every small group at some point. Examples include:

- People won't engage in discussion
- People shy away from praying out loud
- Someone repeatedly skips down rabbit trails and takes the whole group on the journey
- Prayer requests are shallow
- Extra Grace Required (EGR) people who are a bit more needy than the average group member

These are typical small-group issues, and you'll face them at some point if you haven't already. Here are some steps for addressing these Level 1 small-group problems:

Pray. Don't use prayer as a last resort; stay on offense with prayer.

Address the issue with the person individually. Seek to understand the person's perspective. Make observations instead of accusations. For instance, "I've noticed that you don't comment much in the discussion. Is there something we can do to make it easier for you to engage the topic?"

Be creative. This is especially helpful for the person skipping down rabbit trails. Come up with a time limit, a hand signal, or some other means to help the person stay on track. Make it fun rather than burdensome.

Be patient. None of these problems will kill your group, and taking the time to allow them to be solved naturally will create a culture where community can emerge.

Level 2 Problems

Level 2 problems will occur in your group if you stay together long enough to allow real community to emerge. Here are some examples:

- Someone in the group monopolizes the conversation or takes on an authoritative or self-righteous tone
- Someone in the group constantly causes division or makes divisive comments
- "Discussions" (read: fights, arguments, conflict) erupt in your group
- Conversations and relationships remain shallow and surface-level
- Gossip runs rampant
- You have chronic complainers, or negative talk and attitudes emerge
- Someone in your group needs to be confronted about a sin

These problems require a little more skill and a bit of confidence to handle effectively. Here are some ideas:

Pray. Again, get out of the defensive posture and attack from an offensive position.

Don't ignore the issue. You know there's a problem, and it's likely that everyone else in the group knows, too. Ignoring problems never makes them go away.

If the problem lies primarily with one individual, approach that person first. Again, make observations instead of accusations. Seek to understand the person's perspective. Pray together about the situation.

Get help when needed. If the individual is unresponsive or unrepentant, implement the biblical method for conflict resolution found in Matthew 18:15–20. Get a co-leader, coach, or pastor involved in the process.

If something happens in your group, process it as a group. Don't ignore the fact that the tension exists. Address the issue within the group setting.

Protect the group. If a problem persists, it may be necessary to ask a person to leave the group (See "When You Need to Remove a Group Member" for wisdom).

Level 3 Problems

Some unfortunate leaders encounter Level 3 problems during their first week of leadership. Others lead for years before encountering one. These are problems that you're not equipped or expected to handle on your own—they're outside the scope of small-group leader responsibilities. Examples include the following:

- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Repeated offensive activity in the group
- Inappropriate relational and/or sexual behavior between group members
- Repeated divisiveness
- Suicidal tendencies and/or threats
- Eating disorders
- Divorce
- Mental and emotional instability

Here are the action steps:

Prayer. Pray for the situation, but also be sure to get others (fellow group leaders, accountability partners, pastors, etc.) to pray for *you*.

Notify your coach and/or pastor immediately. Be sensitive about who you tell. If it's a big problem, you may need to send it all the way up the chain to a member of the pastoral team immediately.

Be honest. If the group member thinks he or she has told you something in confidence, inform him or her that you are obligated, as a leader within your church, to let a member of the pastoral team know about the issue.

Follow up. Your coach or pastor will work with you to develop an appropriate plan of action and care.

If you're a small-group leader, don't submit your letter of resignation yet! Working with people is tough because people are broken. John Ortberg has said, "People who love authentic community always prefer the pain of temporary chaos to the peace of permanent superficiality." Ortberg is right on. As leaders who believe in the power of life-changing community, we must be willing to deal with the temporary chaos of these issues so we can move past superficial community.

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Discuss

1. What kinds of problems have you encountered? Which level do they fall in?
2. What is the difference between problems you should handle yourself and problems you should report?
3. Who should you contact with Level 3 problems?