

First Night Survival Guide

Preparing for and leading your first meeting

by Will Johnston

Someone asked you to lead a small group. And right now, you're really questioning why you said yes. You've had some training, found a study, talked with your pastor or director, and even had a few people say they're coming. But now it's just two days before your first meeting, and you're not feeling very prepared. You find yourself panicking, wondering what you'll do if no one talks, or if your entire group is made up of weird people.

Leading a small group isn't rocket science, but it can be a bit intimidating, especially the first time around. Here are a few tips to make your first group meeting go smoothly—a survival guide, if you will.

Preparation

It's true: Failing to plan is planning to fail. So consider these four things while preparing for your first meeting.

Communication

A day or two before the group meeting, get in touch with the folks who have expressed interest in your group. You can use the phone, a text, social media, e-mail, or whatever works best for your context and demographic.

Be sure to remind everyone when and where the group is meeting and give them your phone number in case someone gets lost. On that note, be sure your phone is turned on and the ringer is turned up before the group starts. You don't want anyone to miss the meeting because they couldn't get in touch with you at the last minute.

You may also want to ask people to confirm whether or not they're coming so that you can be prepared. It can be tough both mentally and logistically if you expect 15 and get 5 (or vice versa).

Food

Nothing creates conversation like cuisine. I don't know if you've ever noticed, but strangers sitting around a table full of food are much more relaxed and talkative. Food breaks the ice and opens people up. My agenda for the first group meeting is often just dinner and conversation. I want people to start getting to know one another before we dive into a study.

If you don't think you're up for tackling dinner (and I'll be honest, cooking a whole meal for a group of people can add stress to the evening) be sure to have snacks. I recommend the three Cs: chips, cookies, and caffeine. In other words: something salty, something sweet, and something good to drink.

Environment

Create a welcoming environment. People are less likely to stick around if they're uncomfortable. Make sure you have enough chairs. Turn on the lights. Burn a candle to get rid of that funky odor. Put a fresh hand towel in the bathroom.

As a side note: There are some folks with the gift of hospitality reading this who have no idea why this section's here. For those of us without the gift of hospitality, or for those who are perhaps new to having a place to host (ahem, 23-year-old guys just out of college), these tips aren't always second-nature.

Prayer

Prayer is the easiest thing to overlook during the frantic preparation process, but it's also one of the most vital. This isn't just a social gathering or a team meeting. Your goal as a small-group leader is not only to

create community but also to make disciples, to help people become more like Jesus. And if you're going to do that well, you'll need his help to do it.

In the days leading up to the first meeting, pray for your group. Pray that God would send the right people and that those who come would connect well and find community. Pray for wisdom and discernment for yourself as the group leader. Above all, pray that God would be glorified through your group.

Go Time

Once you've prepped as much as possible, you'll actually need to lead the meeting. Whatever you do, be sure to focus on community and vision.

Community

I'd argue that discipleship should be the top priority for your small group. However, it's not your top priority for the first meeting. Instead, your main goal is for people to get to know each other. You don't need to cover material or help people grow spiritually or any of that. Just make sure people actually connect with one another. That's what will bring them back and open the door for discipleship. Here are a few tips to help make that happen:

- Set aside time for conversation. Consider not having any other agenda for the first meeting. Again, having conversation over dinner is a great option.
- Greet everyone personally. As the small-group leader, do your best to meet everyone at the door when they first come in, especially if they don't know others in the group.
- If you notice people standing alone, talk with them and introduce them to other folks. Help group members connect with each other.
- Use an icebreaker question like "Tell us a story about your best friend from childhood." It may seem silly, but it helps spark conversation, and the right questions can really help a group get to know one another. (Check out other [icebreakers](#) on [SmallGroups.com](#).)
- Help people learn each others' names. If it's a big group you may want to bring name tags. You could also play a game to help remember names. For instance, ask people to say their name and an adjective that describes them and begins with the same first letter (e.g., Serene Sarah, Theology Tony, Caring Cathy). Six years later, I still remember my friend Adam as "Average Adam" because he introduced himself that way.

Vision

While your first priority is building community, you have a very important second priority for the night: casting vision for the group. The people who are part of your group want to know what you'll be doing together.

Answer their questions by considering:

- Why are we meeting?
- What do we hope to accomplish?
- Are we a group that requires consistent attendance or is it okay if people pop in and out?
- Do we have a group covenant?
- Will we have weekly homework?
- Are members expected to attend service projects?
- How long will the group last?

If your church has a set idea of what your group will be about, you'll simply communicate these expectations. If you have flexibility over what you'll be doing, studying, and accomplishing, you may want to involve everyone in answering these questions.

Remember that it's much easier to set these expectations at the beginning than it is to change the culture of the group later on. And if a problem does need to be addressed in the future, it's helpful if the expectations were communicated up front.

Next Steps

Whew! You made it through your first meeting. Even if you're exhausted and just want to watch some TV or go to bed, there are a couple of things you need to do that will help you a lot in the future. Then there are a few things you can do later to follow up.

Right Away

First of all, it's a good idea to do something to help you remember people's names. It's easy to forget them by week two. One helpful idea is to picture each person in your head and repeat his or her name (and adjective) a few times. Another idea that has helped me is to sit where you sat during the meeting and write down each person in the group by where they sat. Start with the person to your right and continue until you've made it all the way around the circle. Lastly, you may want to find your new group members on Facebook and send friend requests. All of these tips will help you remember your new group members' names.

Secondly, make a note to follow through on any requests. I've found that during the meeting I might tell one person I'd e-mail him and another person that I'd look up more information on the passage. Don't forget about these requests. Try to do them right away. If that's not possible, write yourself a reminder.

Later On

At some point in the next day or so, you should follow up with your new group members. You can use whatever communication medium is appropriate for your context. I personally find e-mail to be a great tool for the post-meeting follow up. Remind group members of any relevant details, especially the time of the next group meeting and any homework that needs to be done before then. You can also include a link to resources (books, studies, curriculum, etc.) that they need to order for the next meeting.

Lastly, continue to pray for your group. As you get to know them better and better, you'll know how to pray specifically for each member. Most important, ask Jesus to help you all follow him more closely.

Don't Stress Out

I would guess that you've been overwhelmed with information about leading a group, and you probably have no idea how to keep it all straight. Even this "survival guide" may seem overwhelming. You may be going overboard trying to get everything perfect before your first night. If that's you, I have some words of wisdom.

The first night of my small group was just last week. We aren't a new group, but it was our first meeting in a long time and we intentionally welcomed new people to our meeting. Unfortunately, the day of the meeting I didn't have time to prepare. Instead, I ended up dealing with a broken down car, figuring out how to carry a carful of stuff home on the subway. Once home I had to try to fix my cell phone charger, so that my phone would be charged before group. Plus, my wife and I had a fight—just to top off a great day.

Needless to say, very few of the things I normally do to prepare didn't happen. I even missed an e-mail from a prospective group member who wanted to come to my group. According to my suggestions for a successful first meeting, I failed.

But everything turned out fine. The group still met, and we still had a good time getting to know one another. And I don't think anyone hates me. Ultimately, we need to remember that God is responsible for his church, and that includes each of our small groups. God uses our preparations, but God will work it all out, even if you forget the cookies.

—WILL JOHNSTON is the Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.