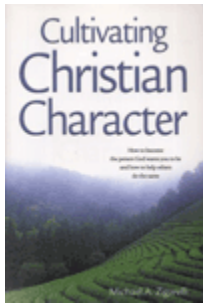
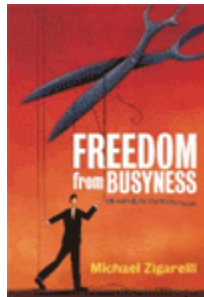


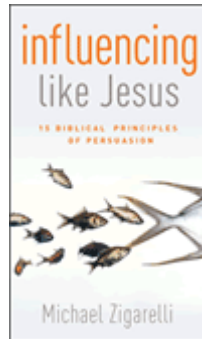
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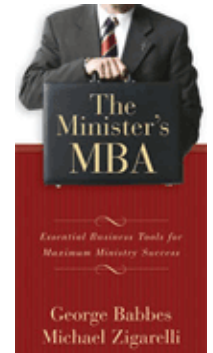
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Twenty Tips for Successful Small Group Leadership

Michael Zigarelli

Every Christian is called to be a leader.

Some are more gifted at leadership than others, for sure, but we worship a God who calls every one of us to influence the people around us—to *lead* them to a fuller understanding of who God is, of what He's done for us, and how He wants us to live our lives.

The Great Commission is perhaps the clearest articulation of our call to leadership (Matthew 28: 18-20). It's reasonably straightforward, isn't it? Make disciples. Influence people. Love people enough to lead them from one place to another. Indeed, every Christian is called to be a leader.

Maybe you're approaching the leadership of this study with the utmost confidence. Maybe you've done this sort of thing before and you're pretty good at it. But if instead you're one of those people who's uneasy about leading a study because you think God has not specifically gifted you to lead others, try to set those concerns aside. That's not a Biblical way of thinking about who God has made you to be. God *does* want you to be a discipler, an influencer—a leader—and He will give you the ability to facilitate well, if you ask Him.

The Art of Leading a Small Group

There's been a lot written on how to lead a small group and how not to lead one. Here's a compilation of some of the best ideas out there—twenty tips that will assist you in leading your group to a life-changing experience.

Tip 1: It's Not About You

Let's get one thing straight from the beginning: leading a small group study is not about you. It's about God. The more you can remain in the mindset of magnifying God and minimizing yourself, the more others will learn from the study. Take a cue from John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30, NAS).

For some small group leaders, this humble posture is quite natural. For others, the ego has a funny way of creeping into everything they do. If you find yourself saying and doing things out of concern for what others will think of you as the leader, that's a red flag. Instead, try not to worry about your reputation—about people-pleasing, in Paul's words (Galatians 1:10). Your job as a small group leader is simply to co-labor with God to draw people closer to Him.

So to boil it down to a sentence: to lead a small group with excellence, be the "guide on the side," not the "sage on the stage." This is God's group. Keep Him at center stage and He will bless everyone in the group.

Tip 2: Operate in God's Strength

Tip 1 said that great small group leadership happens when you make the study *about God*. Here's the flip side: great small group leadership happens when you lead the study *through God*. The best leader is one who's first a follower. Ask God to empower you to lead beyond your abilities and return to this prayer often. Additionally, make prayer the bedrock of your group time together as well, at the very least opening and closing each session by collectively talking to God.

Tip 3: Operate in Joy

The disposition of the leader powerfully drives the disposition of the whole group. When you adopt a joyful and celebratory disposition throughout the study, others will follow. When you smile, when you're upbeat, when you're genuinely excited to be leading, when you celebrate successes, it will infect the group—and that will significantly improve the experience for everyone involved.

As you know, though, joy doesn't just happen. It's not something you can engineer on demand, nor is it something you can fake for very long. Rather, real joy starts with seeing clearly the opportunity with which God has blessed you. You have been commissioned to help Him make people's lives better through leading this study. Your work with this group is, in fact, *a sacred ministry*. This sort of perspective leads to gratitude for the opportunity and out of gratitude flows joy, both in your preparation and in your leadership of the discussion.

Tip 4: Encourage Accountability

Accountability matters, and because it matters, we see it in a lot of contexts. CEOs answer to boards. Elders oversee pastoral performance. Accrediting bodies hold schools to high standards. Governments guard against excessive power of their branches by maintaining checks-and-balance systems.

Accountability matters in small groups as well. We're more likely to experience permanent change when we have an accountability partner who will support us, ask us whether we're keeping up with the studies, and check on our progress. So, early on, encourage people to walk through the study with at least one other person.

Tip 5: Preparation, Preparation and Preparation

The familiar real estate axiom is that the three most important things in a property are location, location and location. In small group leadership—and in teaching generally—one could piggyback on this axiom and say the three most important things are preparation, preparation and preparation. There's no substitute for it (as some of us have seen from witnessing an unprepared group leader or teacher.)

If you're going to facilitate effectively, you need to have mapped out how you'll begin the group meeting, what questions you'll cover, approximately how much time you'll be devoting to each of them, some proposed answers for each question, and a way to bring the meeting to effective closure. In your planning, though, don't worry about becoming an expert on the subject matter. Great facilitation can easily happen even though you're not an expert on the topic (remember, you're a "guide on the side.") But it's unlikely to happen without planning and thorough preparation.

Tip 6: Model the Way

If you want people to listen to one another, then listen closely to people. If you want them to be transparent and candid, then you go first. If you want them to dig deeper to identify root causes of their problems, then model that yourself. If you want them to be accountable to one another, then be sure they know of your accountability relationship. Lead by example, not just by what you say.

Tip 7: Create a Safe Environment for Sharing

In almost any small group, there will be people who are intimidated or shy about participating. There are some things you can do, though, to make it "safe" for them to engage. For starters, be transparent. Share your own struggles. Admit your own challenges with the issues being discussed. Confess your own imperfections and others will feel freer to then share their own.

It's also important to be supportive early in the study of almost every comment. That doesn't mean you tolerate heresy, but it does mean signaling that people don't need to be profound to contribute something of value. Try to avoid strongly disagreeing with people until such a point when everyone's had an opportunity to feel comfortable contributing.

Along the same lines, it's also wise to remain sensitive to others' traditions. More and more, people are crossing denominational lines to participate in small group studies. If you have an ecumenical small group, seek to understand where others are coming from and minimize the disparagement of other denominational perspectives. Of course, there will be times when it's appropriate to raise and examine these differences, but those discussions should probably be deferred until the group has matured a bit.

Tip 8: Hone Your Listening Skills

There's an old adage that says: "Being listened to is so close to being loved, that most people can't tell the difference." You may have experienced the feeling firsthand. Do what you can to make sure everyone in your group feels it as well.

Concentrate on what each person is saying, rather than thinking about your own response. Rephrase their point when appropriate, so they'll know they've been heard. Use non-verbal cues as well that show you're listening—cues like maintaining a comfortable level of eye contact with the person speaking, occasionally nodding, positioning your body to squarely face the speaker, leaning toward the speaker slightly, and so on. You'll be amazed at how such little things can make a person feel "listened to"—and loved!

Tip 9: Stay on Point

This is the bane of many small groups. One tangential comment gives license to the next, and before you know it, a series of loosely related remarks has eclipsed your entire meeting time.

Ever been there? My guess is that you know exactly what I'm talking about, since this happens with unfortunate regularity.

This is a leadership problem. To avoid it, keep the group focused on the question at hand and follow up tangential comments by bringing the group back to the actual question. Everyone benefits when a leader steers the conversation, and everyone suffers when he or she does not.

Tip 10: Be Sure That Scripture Is Your Filter

One would think we wouldn't have to say such a thing, but it seems that sometimes, our filters for right and wrong get clouded, even in Christian circles. Some people use their experience as an arbiter of right and wrong. Others use society's rules. Some are pragmatists, basing the right thing to do on "what works."

There are a lot of worldviews infecting Christian thinking these days, so when group members suggest solutions to problems, don't shy away from asking whether their suggestion aligns with scripture. Ask them if Jesus did it that way, or would do it that way. Ask them for any Biblical support they can think of.

If, as group leaders we persistently come back to the Bible as God's standards, our group members will too.

Tip 11: Listen for Segues to the Next Question

It's invaluable to always know where you want to go next with a discussion. Sometimes you simply have to announce the transition (i.e., "let's turn a corner now and look at the next question"), but the meeting flows more smoothly if you capitalize on natural transition points. Expert facilitators listen closely for comments that connect to where they want to go next and quickly use those comments to move the discussion forward.

Tip 12: Echo What's Been Said

This is such an essential facilitation technique! From time to time, you'll find it helpful to restate what somebody has just said—to "echo" it for the group. Echoing not only lets the speaker know that he or she has been understood, it also serves to clarify that person's point for everyone else. Beyond that, echoing makes it more likely that the rest of the group will respond to that person's comment, rather than just following with an unrelated comment.

So echo comments where appropriate, and then, since you have the floor at that moment, invite commentary on what's just been said. The flow of discussion will improve dramatically.

Tip 13: Connect the Dots

Another way to enhance the flow of discussion is to connect some people's comments to other people's comments. "So Sherry, you think that the verse calls us to action but Fran, two minutes ago, you said you didn't understand it that way. Can somebody else help us out here?" This is good facilitation because it clarifies where we are with the discussion and where we want it to go.

Tip 14: Cut Off Dominators

Let's face it, they're out there. Many groups are blessed with that spirited person who contributes a little too much. And that can diminish the experience for everyone else. Usually, if the leader doesn't take control of this situation, no one will.

One solution is to talk to the person away from the group. It doesn't take much. Start by affirming the positive and then candidly make your request. "Hank, you really have a lot of good stuff to contribute in this study, but I want to make sure that others have an adequate opportunity to share, too. Would you be willing to scale back—at least a little—the number of times you contribute?"

A second way to balance contribution is to simply cut in when the dominator takes a breath, echo what he or she has said to that point (so they know they've been heard), and invite someone to respond to that. As a last resort, you might say to the group something like: "I don't want you to feel like you're in school, but in the interest of managing this discussion, it would help me if you all would raise your hand when you want to comment." Then regulate the dominator's contributions in a way that's more helpful to the group.

Tip 15: Ask for People's Opinions

"How 'bout somebody who hasn't spoken yet?" "Anyone else want to comment on this issue?" "Does anyone have a different perspective on this?" These and similar questions are non-threatening ways of inviting people into the conversation. Write out some phrases with which you're comfortable and use them at strategic points in your group meetings to draw in quiet group members. Sometimes just this little nudge can be a turning point for people.

Tip 16: Frame Questions Using "Why" and "How"

Usually, when you ask a question that begins with "why" or "how," people tend to answer with more thoughtful, more extensive responses than if you ask a question that begins with "who," "where," or "when." Think about it. Questions that begin with these latter words can lend themselves to one or two word answers, right? But try answering a "why" or "how" question with one word. Not likely. If your goal is to get people talking, think about reframing the questions you ask.

Tip 17: Permit Silence After You Ask a Question

Eventually, it'll happen. You'll ask a question and no one will say anything. Avoid the temptation to fill that void with your own voice. Give people time to think. Let them muster the courage to answer a tough question. Give them a moment to hear from God, if that's the prompting they're seeking.

Get comfortable with silence after posing a question. Often, your patience will be rewarded with some of the richest and most poignant answers of the week.

Tip 18: Stay With Fruitful Conversation, Even If It's Taking Too Much Time

For group leaders who are especially time-conscious, it's natural to march through a set of questions and make sure everything gets covered in the time allotted. The best group leaders remain mindful, though, that the *real* goal of the meetings is *transformation*, not efficiency or box-checking.

Sometimes a question will stimulate lots of discussion. It will go deep; it will touch a chord; it will create excitement; it will surface pains or misunderstandings that need to be addressed; it will plant the seeds of lasting change for people. Avoid cutting off God's work in these situations. Don't be a slave to a script, insisting on covering all five questions in ten minutes each. Some questions may require twenty minutes, others three minutes. So be flexible and learn to discern when to deviate from your original plan.

Tip 19: Use a Board or Easel, if Appropriate

Chronicling on a board the relevant points that people make is a wonderful way of affirming, echoing, and clarifying what's being said. It will also help you to "connect the dots" more easily. Beyond that, many people will retain more of what's said if they've both heard it and seen it in writing.

Tip 20: Summarize Key Points

Many people will find it instructive if you can recap some of the more important lessons from the discussion. The end of the session is a natural time to do this, but it's also helpful to do it at the beginning of a group meeting ("this is what God's taught us so far in this study"), as well as after particularly important or complicated points in the discussion. Brief, oral summaries from the leader enhance learning and retention, so take notes during the discussion and bless the group by emphasizing the essential take-aways.



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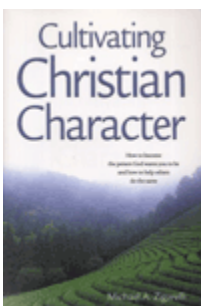
Michael Zigarelli is Professor of Leadership and Strategy at Messiah College and the former Dean of the Regent University School of Business. Dr. Zigarelli's research in the fields of management, practical theology, law, and ethics has appeared in a number of scholarly journals and magazines, and he is the author of ten books, including *Influencing Like Jesus*, *The Minister's MBA*, *Cultivating Christian Character*, and *Management by Proverbs*. His work has been translated into several languages.

Michael is also the creator of Assess-Yourself.org and Christianity9to5.org and serves as a management consultant for several nonprofit organizations. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife Tara and their four children. You can reach him at mzigarelli@messiah.edu

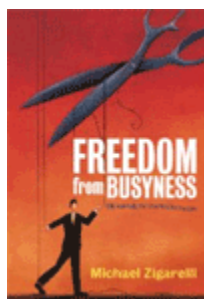


Some other resources from Michael Zigarelli

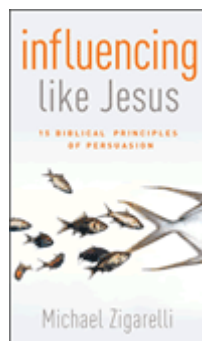
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