

Permission to Be Real

Helping people open up is a valuable skill for small-group leaders.
Seth Widner

I grew up attending Sunday school and Bible study classes in the church—all of which were packed full of great information about the truths of Scripture. The purpose of those classes was to educate people with the knowledge of Scripture. They were guided by a set curriculum, and the focus was always on the content of that particular study. In essence, everything was knowledge driven.

The Problem with Knowledge

I learned a lot of great things in those classes over the years and met many people. Although I gained some knowledge of Scripture, I made very little connection with my fellow participants. Our interaction didn't really connect us together in anyway. When I talked, I was normally shouting out an answer, hoping that I would gain the approval of my teachers and peers.

During those years, I was struggling with different sins in my life. My mind was plagued with many questions and doubts about my faith. But I didn't dare bring that up in front of my classmates or my teachers. Why? I feared that I would be rejected. I didn't feel as if I had permission or freedom to be real. So I wore a mask to cover up my struggles and weaknesses, hoping my teachers or classmates would believe I was perfect.

Our small groups must be safe places for people to remove their masks. They must have the permission to be authentic, to be real. A healthy small group contains people who live transparent lives before Christ and one another. First John 1:7 says, "If we walk in the light, as he (Jesus) is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

Here are some practical tips to help your group to be real:

1. *Be the example.* If you want your group to live transparent lives with one another, you must pave the way first. No matter what type of day you are having, tell your group about it, whether it is good or bad. If you never pick up a mask to cover your sins or struggles, you will be giving them permission to be real.
2. *Let them see your weaknesses.* Never allow your group to think you are perfect.
3. *Allow you group to see you being real with God through prayer.* For a greater understanding of our freedom to express our emotions to God, read through the Psalms.
4. *When you sense someone being real with your group, thank them for it.* It takes courage to be real!
5. *Ask great follow-up questions.* If someone requests prayer, ask them how they want you to pray. If someone states their perspective on a topic of question, ask them to explain their point of view more.

Following Up

Let's follow up on that last point: follow-up questions. They are a great way to help your group members open up and apply what they are learning through your group. In small groups, it is crucial to ask the right questions. This begins with the discussion questions from whatever material we are studying, but we shouldn't stop there. Those questions are designed to stimulate conversation. But once the conversation begins, we must keep things flowing.

We can do this by asking great follow-up questions. A great follow-up question places people in a position to conform their lives more to Christ, and prevents a group from staying on the surface level in their walks with

God. Follow-up questions give the needed details that offer explanations for our answers. These can come during our group discussions, casual conversations, or while sharing prayer requests together.

For example, Jillian was in a difficult season of her life. Every week, her prayer request seemed to be the same as before. She would simply say, "Please pray for me at work. I have a lot of stress." Her leaders recognized that Jillian was keeping things on the surface level. So they asked great follow-up questions. "What is the source of your stress?" This opened a door for Jillian to provide more details. Then she simply said, "Pray for me." Her leaders then asked, "How would you like us to pray?" By asking those simple follow-up questions, Jillian was able to open up more with her group. Her eyes were also opened to the source of her stress and she included the group in praying for specific things.

Here are some tips to help you begin asking great follow-up questions:

1. *Request an explanation for an answer.* This will help provide more details and background for a given answer.
2. *Ask open questions and avoid closed questions.* An open question requires more details, while a closed question simply requires a "yes or no" answer.
 - a. Open question: What is your method of getting to work?
 - b. Closed question: Do you drive to work?
3. *Practice makes perfect.* Find a friend or family member to practice on. Simply ask them a question and go from there. Remember that follow-up questions provide more details.
4. *Create the expectation for your group's discussion.* Once you use follow-up questions with your group, they will catch on quickly. Soon they will learn that it is important to provide details to their answers and prayer requests. Eventually, you will ask fewer follow-up questions because your group will begin giving more details beforehand!

Seth Widner is Family Pastor of The Journey Church in Fernandia Beach, Florida.

—Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today. Used with permission.