



Ways to Get Adults to Talk

Improving the Quality and Quantity of Participation in Adult Discussions

The silence after you ask a question in an adult discussion group can be deafening—and interminable! Or so it may seem to the leader. Sometimes the response is related to the vagueness of the question or uncertainty about when it's appropriate to speak. (See the essay "The Art of Asking Good Questions.") More often than not, lack of confidence in one's knowledge and observations causes participants to be reticent about jumping into a conversation. Here are some reliable ideas for boosting confidence and engaging adults in more lively interaction. They will also ensure that more-introverted members of the group have an opportunity to make their thoughts heard.

1. Give people an opportunity to test out and sharpen their ideas before offering them to the whole group.

When reacting to a presentation or a conversation, it feels much safer to offer one's initial ideas to the filters of others who are reflecting on the same material. Similarly, questions and thoughts that have been formed by speaking or writing are much easier to offer to a group. This is the biggest factor in improving the quality of responses that come back to the whole group as well. You can do this in a number of ways:

- A. Invite participants to turn to one person beside them and respond to a question or idea. Allow one or two minutes for conversation; then ask for one response from their conversation. You'll get the best response they thought of or an idea that has already been clarified and sharpened.
- B. Ask groups of three or four to discuss their responses to a question or idea and select one response to offer back to the whole group. Again,

you are providing a process of evaluation and a way for a really good idea to rise to the top. And because they select it, you now know this is something they collectively value.

- C. Invite participants to take a minute to think about what has just been said and then write down a couple of ideas that came to mind. Then ask, "What occurs to you?" or "What is troubling you about this?"

- D. Give participants a couple of minutes to write down two questions they have about what has been presented or discussed. You can then hear and respond to any number of them as you have time. A written question can prevent a rambling speech that leads to a half-formed question. It will also be more direct and clearer.

2. Prime the pump by providing ways to help participants be ready to articulate their ideas. Preparation heightens interest and breadth and depth of response. Try these ideas:

- A. After a presentation, or when the subject seems complicated or difficult, tell the group you will provide two minutes of silence for them to reflect on what they have been hearing. Be specific about the amount of time you will allow, and look visibly at your watch to show you are serious about keeping it. Don't allow people who are ready to jump in immediately to do so. If someone attempts to respond, simply say, "Hold that thought for a moment. This is complicated material, and I want to make sure everyone has time to think about it and prepare to respond." At the

end of the time of silence, you can open up the floor for responses or questions or ask the participants to talk about their reflections with one or two others.

- B. Ask a group of four or five to quickly make a list of ideas they have heard with which they agree and/or ideas they have heard with which they disagree. You might then make a master list on newsprint by asking participants to name only those from their list that have not already been named. Then pick a fruitful place to start! Or, invite the group to identify ones they want to explore.
- C. Before you begin, identify your topic as simply as possible and invite participants to quickly name some things they know about it. This will both give you an idea of their familiarity with the topic and give them a sense that collectively they are bringing something to the conversation and that they can learn from one another.
- D. Ask participants to write down three things they know about the subject. This takes very little time but enacts an affirmation that participants are a valuable resource and already have something to contribute that will be useful in the conversation.

3. Engage the participants in building on and responding to one another's ideas. Discussions are greatly enriched when participants begin responding to one another's insights and observations. You can set up that interaction:

- A. Give participants time to write one question they would like to ask the group. Emphasize that the group as a whole will be invited to respond. This will focus the questions on group opinions and reflections and set up the ensuing conversation. Group members know that the questions are meant for them and that their input is desirable and valuable. Set a time limit and take as many as fit.
- B. When someone asks a question, redirect it to the group by asking, "What do the rest of you think?" "How would the rest of you respond to that?" or "What are some other ways to think about it?"
- C. Engage the questioner in responding by first asking, "Before I open up that question to the whole

group, what thoughts do you already have on it yourself?" Often, people ask questions because they have already given them some thought. This feeds the group with ideas that have already been formed, as well as provides additional clarity about the question. It also gives the group time to know that the question is coming to them and not to the leader.

- D. After some time of discussion, invite participants to talk with one or two others and note a couple of things they heard from the group that they'd like to explore more fully. Ask them to select one item in particular and be prepared to address it to a person in the group they think will have some insight into it.

4. Feed the group discussion with information participants can use in it. Here are some strategies:

- A. If you are discussing printed material participants have in front of them, point to a particular section and ask them to skim it, looking for information about something in particular. Be as specific as possible—reasons something might have happened, definitions behind important terms, feelings that might lie underneath actions, steps that led to a response, and so forth. You are asking them to find information that will help them take the conversation to the next level.
- B. Ask them to read or skim a section with a particular question in mind; then tell them the exact question you will ask them immediately following the reading.
- C. Decide on three or four important questions you will ask about a section they can skim or read; then divide the group into that number of small groups. Give each group only one question to keep in mind as they read. This way, all have an overview of the material, but subsets have been prepared for when their question comes. The quality of response will sharpen and participation will broaden.
- D. If a number of characters or perspectives are involved, select the three to five of most importance to the direction you intend to take the conversation. Assign group participants only one each to

focus on, so they will be ready to offer reflections on that perspective to the group.

- E. With a little bit of preparation, all of these ideas can be used to focus participants on particular ideas in something they will read before the next time they meet, on aspects of a presentation that will precede a discussion, or on parts of a media clip you particularly want them to notice, and so forth. Remember, preparation leads to a higher quality of participation and readies more people to contribute.

5. Include those who are engaged by ideas presented in ways other than, or in addition to, words. These ideas need not take long, but they offer some ways to stimulate imagination and reflection that might take your discussions to a new level of creative response. They will be especially engaging for those more comfortable with senses and feelings and aesthetic experience than with the verbal expression of ideas.

- A. Remember that a picture may be worth a thousand words, especially in a world shaped by the visual presentation of ideas. Does what you are discussing or reading or presenting suggest a picture to you that might be shown? Show it to the group and ask them what relationship they see between it and the topic or how the picture illustrates some aspect of the topic for them.
- B. Invite participants to bring in a picture that illustrates one aspect of the topic.
- C. Select and show a brief clip from a movie or a television show that might help participants think about the topic in a new way.
- D. Select and play (or sing together) a hymn or song that in some way illustrates an aspect of the topic. Ask what new insights the song suggests.

6. Connect with the life experiences of participants. Nothing is as engaging as something one knows about, cares about, or can identify with in some per-

sonal way. Catching their interest and keeping it generates lively interaction with the subject and with one another. This connection is especially important at these key times in a discussion:

- A. Plan an opening that personalizes the topic in some way. For example, refer to something current in world news, in your community, or in church; tell a personal story that you know will resonate with the group or a story about something related that they will recognize; ask them what they imagined would engage them as they came into this conversation, what they were eager to hear others' opinions about, or something that agitated them in the reading. You are looking for something that will hook them from the beginning.
- B. If you sense interest waning, ask the group if they are ready to move in a new direction, and invite their suggestions. Don't mistake thinking silence for disinterest—if you're not sure which it is, ask. Be prepared to simply take a new direction yourself.
- C. Plan an ending you and they won't want to skip! It may be an application of what you have been discussing, a plan to explore something further on their own, the identification of one significant learning during the session, the selection of one question on the topic to ask another person, or commitment to some action because of what was discussed. Look for something that provides participants an opportunity to answer the question, "What difference does it make to me that I know this/talked about this/learned this?"

About the Writer

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(The next page is intended to be a tip sheet to be printed and posted by one's computer or wherever it will be useful when planning to lead a discussion.)

Getting Them to Talk!

Ways to test out and sharpen ideas:

1. Talk with one other person about ____.
2. Discuss with three or four others your response to the idea that ____.
3. Think in silence about ____.
4. Write down two questions about ____.

Ways to prime the pump:

1. Think in silence about _____. Be prepared to say one thing you think about it.
2. In groups of four or five, quickly list ideas with which you agree/disagree.
3. Ask the group to brainstorm things they know about this topic/story/etc.
4. Write down three things you know about ____.

Ways to engage participants in building on and responding to one another's ideas:

1. Write one question you would like to ask the group (not the discussion leader).
2. Redirect a question to the group by asking, "What do the rest of you think?" or "How would the rest of you respond to that?"
3. Ask the questioner, "Before I open up that question to the whole group, what thoughts do you have yourself?"
4. Talk with one or two others, and note a couple of things you heard from the group that you would like

to explore more fully. Be prepared to address the issues to the people you think will have some insight into them.

Ways to feed the group discussion with information participants can use in it:

1. Skim for information about ____.
2. Read or skim with this question in mind: ____.
3. Assign small groups one question to keep in mind as they read.
4. Take the role of ____ as you listen.

Ways to include those who are engaged by ideas presented in other ways:

1. Show a picture. Ask what relationship they see between it and the topic.
2. Invite participants to bring in a picture that illustrates an important aspect of the topic.
3. Show a clip from a movie or a television show.
4. Play or sing a hymn or song that illustrates an aspect of the topic.

Don't forget:

1. Connect with the life experience of participants.
2. Plan an opening that "gets them."
3. Be prepared to take a new direction if interest wanes.
4. Plan an ending you and they won't want to skip!