

SMALL GROUP FACILITATOR ORIENTATION

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource is designed to prepare you to facilitate a Highrock Small Group and provides helpful considerations for fostering a healthy Small Group culture and posture as you lead. Use the worksheet questions and notes to develop the concepts into practical applications for you personally and for your group. Your responses should serve as a jumping off point for conversations with your group members about what the goals, vision, posture, and healthy communication will look like in your group. This orientation resource may be used during a large training or individually with the supporting training video.

Would you like *pastoral support* as you are starting a small group? Reach out to smallgroups@highrock.org who can help you connect with the best support for your group.

Do you have a co-facilitator? All groups are encouraged to have at least two people who can share leadership responsibilities. It helps create group culture and offers two axes of support for group members. Co-leaders can swap off leading discussions and co-leading offers an opportunity for leaders to have sounding boards in each other and a safe person to debrief with.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[OVERVIEW & LEADERSHIP POSTURE](#)

- [Belonging & Trust](#)
- [Culture Anchors for Small Group Dynamics](#)
- [Partnering with the Holy Spirit](#)

[MORE THAN COMFORT](#)

- [Offering Challenge](#)
- [Getting Back on Topic](#)

[GROUP EXPECTATIONS](#)

- [Expectations for Facilitators](#)
- [Expectations for Members](#)

[REFLECTION EXERCISE](#)

[SETTING UP YOUR GROUP](#)

[RESOURCE](#)

OVERVIEW AND LEADERSHIP POSTURE

Belonging and Trust

*“Because true **belonging** only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of **belonging** can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.”*
“Brene Brown” Daring Greatly

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.’

*When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” **Matthew 7:24-29***

Culture Anchors for Small Group Dynamics

It will be important and useful for you and the group to be familiar with Highrock’s vision and values. Instead of a list of rules to follow, allow these to be helpful guiding principles as you discern the direction, culture, and norms of your group. If there are disagreements, conflicts, or decisions to be made, using the mission and vision statements can be a helpful place to begin.

Small groups can be a great place to find authentic community and safe places to ask questions. When there is a shared understanding of goals, expectations, vision, and values, it can foster greater trust and safety because everyone knows what they can expect from each other when things are going well and when a disagreement arises. Consider how the statements below will guide the posture you have towards each other during your time together in both the short-term and long-term.

MISSION STATEMENT: “Encourage you to ask questions, inspire you to follow Jesus, and challenge you to put love into action.”

VISION

Hospitality: Compelled by God’s love, we remove barriers in order to welcome all people into God’s community. *They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. (Mark 2:2-4)*

Honesty: Freed from shame by God's grace, we offer one another truth and our true selves, both our weaknesses and strengths. *For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2 Corinthians 4:5-7)*

Humility: Awed by God's grandeur and mystery, we depend on God fully while holding convictions humbly. *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

Curiosity: Captivated by God's self-revelation, we seek wisdom by asking questions, wrestling with Scripture, and learning from many voices. *There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." (Exodus 3:2-3)*

Solidarity: Inspired by the passion of Jesus, we share the burdens of others, and put love into action. *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:3-8)*

Partnering with the Holy Spirit

In leading a small group, your role is not to be the expert or to simply convey knowledge from a book or study. In leading a group, you are fostering discussion, personal exploration, community, and helping all group members to hear from the Holy Spirit. Our faith is not meant to be lived in isolation. We need our community to help hold our stories and experiences and be together in prayer. As the leader, your role is to help set a tone of being on the journey together.

Leading a small group also invites you to be mindful and attentive to your own spiritual journey. How are you connecting with God? There will be seasons where this looks different and you may feel a sense of "disconnection" that doesn't disqualify you from leading a group- but in that season, be authentic and share where you are in the group. Everyone experiences those seasons! Also, your campus pastor is always available to support you.

Partnering with the Holy Spirit means having the humility to know we all have things we are working on. We aren't supposed to stand in for God, but help point people back to God. There will be things we won't have the answers for. It can be hard to sit with those moments as we are hard wired as humans to want to fix and offer solutions. Sometimes the impulse to fix rather than listen can come from a desire to make

ourselves more comfortable, rather than the person who is experiencing hardship or suffering. In these moments we can model Jesus' posture of holding space and solidarity in suffering.

Partnering with the Holy Spirit can also mean listening to where God is at work in someone's life. It can look like:

- Stating what you have heard from what they have shared, and asking "did I hear you correctly?"
- Asking how they have heard from God in the past
- Offering a passage that comes to mind for them to consider in light of their circumstance.
- Inviting the group to pause for a minute in silence to pray, or pausing to pray together aloud. This allows time for everyone to slow down and pause before the conversation continues

WHEN IN DOUBT

We will cover a lot of material and share many tips for guiding a group through a small group. Consider the Conversation Covenant below your quick reference guide or your cheat sheet. Setting this up as your standard for how you will relate to each other will allow for a baseline of conduct which the group can point back to if/when there is conflict.

CONVERSATION COVENANT

I pledge:

To act in good faith, with curiosity. I will assume the best about my conversation partners when entering into our groups. I will give the benefit of the doubt recognizing that they may know something I don't.

To show respect. I will show respect. I will be polite and give due regard for the feelings and traditions of others. I understand that I do not have to agree with someone to show them respect.

To speak the truth. I won't use rhetorical tricks to try to win an argument. I will speak what I genuinely believe is the nuanced truth.

To aim to discover the truth. I will not enter into a conversation with the purpose of changing the mind of anyone to my way of thinking.

To focus on what we can change. I will focus on what we can do differently in the future since we cannot change what we did in the past.

To take responsibility for the conversation. I will take responsibility for the quality of the conversation and the abidance of the rules both in principle and in spirit.

To follow the covenant even when others fail to do so. I will abide by the rules regardless of whether another person breaks them.

To lighten-up and approach the conversation in good humor. I recognize that humor is a hallmark of a constructive, generative conversation and take the conversation in good humor.

MORE THAN COMFORT

Offering Challenge

As a small group facilitator it is important to create a culture where members can feel comfortable enough to be honest and vulnerable. However, it is also important to mindfully offer an invitation to deeper considerations of where God could be leading them in or through that circumstance. This invitation can often be timely in seasons of waiting, transitions, disappointment, confusion etc. Facilitators (and group members) should together be mindful of discerning when to hold space and when to offer invitations which offer a challenge in that moment. Having grace for yourself and others and leading with curiosity will be helpful guides along the way.

If you feel like this kind of awareness isn't your strength, the great thing about being in a group is that you can come at it together. As you get to know each other, you will likely find there is a person or people who are tuned in well to this nuance and awareness of how to offer space and also offer challenge.

Examples

Person has a sick mom and asks to pray for mom's comfort and peace for their parents.

Of course the group should pray for their mom. As a leader you should also consider how your group member is handling it, and if there is support they could use. You could ask if they feel comfortable sharing about what their relationship with their mom is like and if this is bringing anything up for them. You could invite them to consider (as appropriate) if there is any way they are feeling led to support or pray for this sick parent.

A group member is sharing about how upset they are about the refugee crisis on the border and asks for prayer for those who are in danger and in need of homes.

Along with prayer, how might God be inviting them to engage with what is going on? A next step for them could be to find agencies to get involved with or learn about why the crisis is happening. Prayer is powerful and important; it also often leads to action. So, as this has come to this person's attention, invite them to investigate how they can get involved in providing relief as they are able.

Perpetually experiencing hardship and asking for prayer. This person might also be asking why they are always the one struggling when others are not.

It is rare that we will be able to answer this question. This is an opportunity to sit with them and validate their experience and feelings. Ex. "I don't know what God is doing in this. But this sounds really hard, and I am so sorry." The next step could be to ask, "How can I support you?" "Would you like me to listen and then we can pray together?" You could also ask if they would like help finding help or resources for their circumstance. But they might just be looking for someone to validate them, pray, and offer encouragement through scripture. You can also be praying for them while listening during the conversation. If there are bigger needs like housing, health, or financial support you could look into state and local agencies together.

Getting Back On Topic

There will be times when you may need to divert the planned time because a group member is in crisis, but being ready to navigate challenging dynamics and bring the group back on topic can be invaluable to group facilitation. When you find a group member is in the midst of sharing in a way that dominates the conversation or re-directs it way off topic, here are some possible ways to be sure to acknowledge them and move the discussion back on topic.

- Acknowledge that any personal sharing is appreciated.
 - Thanks so much for sharing that...

- Shares a very strong opinion that feels out of left field from the discussion at hand.
 - *That is actually a really interesting topic, right now I'd like to return to the passage/topic we have been discussing. Maybe we can follow up this week to talk more about what you were sharing.*
 - *I just want to acknowledge we don't all come from the same place. We all have different understandings of this topic. This might need to be followed up on and discussed more later. Let's find a time to continue that conversation.*
 - *This seems really important to you, but we do have to move on. Maybe we can talk more afterward so I can hear more about this. Or we can set up a time this week.*

- Enthusiastically and at length answers every question first.
 - *Would you mind writing that down and we can return to it later, I just want to give some others an opportunity to share their thoughts.*

- Sharing something very personal that needs more attention than available in your meeting time.
 - *That sounds really hard and I'd love for us to pray for you at the end of our discussion (take it up again at the end of the discussion).*

When you are hitting group silence you can: reframe the question, ask if you need to clarify what you are asking, or you can normalize calling on people to invite their input. You can also pause and have folks write down some thoughts if it is a deeper question which requires time for consideration or prayer.

- Let's pause to take 2 minutes to think about the question and write down some of our thoughts.
- Ask the group: Is there a different question or thought that is on your mind?
- Call on folks: _____, is there anything you want to add?
- Before moving on, _____, do you have any thoughts?

In the "Making Small Groups Work" guide you will find suggestions for when you need to address difficult situations or offer more difficult feedback in the event there is conflict rising in the group.

GROUP EXPECTATIONS

These are quick bullet points for logistical details for setting up and managing a small group. There will be overlap with the leader and group expectations. There are many ways to practice one's faith and follow of Jesus faithfully. A posture of learning from each other will be beneficial to those in the group. Keep circling back to a big picture of God rather than a very limited picture.

EXPECTATIONS FOR FACILITATORS

Share this portion with your group. It is vital as a facilitator that there is conversation about what structures and expectations you have for yourself and allowing the group to decide together what the role/responsibilities/expectations are for the leader, and also what they are not.

Clarity around facilitator roles can bring safety to a group by setting expectations that are clear and understood by all. Unclear expectations could cause a group member to feel unseen or not realize that they have big expectations of their facilitator to be a best friend. This could potentially foster resentment both ways. Clear expectations can also free the facilitator from feeling over-responsible for the group's decisions, growth, and development. Clear expectations should lead to better group health and set a foundation of safety and appropriate care for each other.

- Be self aware & aware of the group: note what you are bringing weekly into the discussion (from your own experiences, wounds, biases, and world-view). You and your group members can use the [Personal inventory](#) for a quick self check-in before your group starts. It can be a helpful way to name where you are at (head, heart, gut) before entering your time together.
- Do all the things the group is doing
 - Do the Bible study questions ahead of time. Note your reflections and things you think the group may want to discuss.
 - Review questions beforehand to be able to navigate the material and conversations.
- Access: Have a mechanism to check in during the week with the group: email, text, assign prayer partners.
- Be prepared and on-time for the meetings. Communicate about meetings as needed.
- Allow group members to have roles and responsibilities within the group.
- Speak for yourself- i.e. use "I statements"
- Respect others: Don't correct or invalidate others' feelings
- No fixing "you should..."
 - Return to wonder- examine what is going on inside you as people are sharing. Are you getting upset by something someone is saying..."I wonder why that is."
- Leave room for silence in the conversation.
- Observe confidentiality* Pastoral support is available to you for resources or if you have a member who has indicated they might be a danger to themselves or others.
- Pray for your group members and take on a posture of prayer yourself during your gatherings.
- Trust that God is at work through conscious dependence of the Holy Spirit

EXPECTATIONS FOR MEMBERS

Many of the directives below have been taken from Ruth Haley Barton's Book, *Sacred Rhythms*. They provide a great framework for setting the posture of how the group makes space for each other and what the expectations are. On the sheet attached, write down any additional expectations/ values/ norms your group would like to highlight, add, or prioritize.

- We will be faithful to engage with the material.
- We will support and pray for one another as we each explore what faithfulness looks like in our lives and respond faithfully to God's invitations along the way.
- We will respect each other's personal relationship with God, understanding that each person's relationship with God might be different than our own.
- We will create and maintain a safe environment for questions and wondering. This means we will listen rather than fix and ask questions rather than give answers.
- We will seek to increase our self-awareness and be appropriately self-disclosing respecting our own boundaries and those of others.
- We will always have a posture of humility and curiosity to ask questions so that we might learn more about each other rather than making assumptions when there is something we don't understand.
- We will aim to discover the truth together. We will not enter into a conversation with the purpose of changing the mind of anyone to our way of thinking.
- We commit to not taking ourselves too seriously, recognizing humor and humility go hand in hand.
- We will pay particular attention to the times and ways in which God is moving in each person's life and seek to affirm evidence of each person's growth and transformation.
- We will honor confidentiality*. What is shared in the group stays in the group!
- Wherever someone is on their spiritual journey, they are welcome. We affirm that complex experiences, cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds shape a person to be who they are.

Additional considerations:

- We will acknowledge and listen if/when a fellow group member brings forward a hurt experienced in the group or by a group member. With love we will consider together what restoration looks like.
- **If there is a concern for a member's safety, as they could be at risk for harming themselves or others, the group facilitator or member may be empowered to reach out to a Highrock staff member or support organization as they feel is warranted by their concern.*

Remember that the focus is on transformation, not information. Closing your group meeting time with prayer that celebrates what God is doing in each person's life and affirms each person's spiritual desire and intent for the week to come is an important way of "gathering up" all that has been shared and entrusting it to God.

REFLECTION EXERCISE (5-10 min)

(3-5 min) Pause and review the Facilitator and Group expectations and **note if there are areas you feel come naturally and which you feel you could use more support in. Additionally, are there strengths you feel you might bring to the group as a facilitator/member that aren't noted here? Make notes below.**

- **Underline** phrases that can help you remember a healthy posture towards others.
- ***Star*** words or phrases which will help you feel seen/heard/ safe in the group.
- **Circle** any points which might not come naturally to you but you want to grow in.

(3-5 min) Together in pairs/triads/groups discuss broadly what stood out to you. If not in a group, note what themes or observations stood out to you during the exercise below.

SETTING UP YOUR GROUP

WORKSHEET- fill out what you can, then return back to complete as you have more details

Are you starting a short-term group or long-term (ongoing) group? _____

What are the time frames for reflecting on if the group goals and purposes are still in alignment or need shifting? (quarterly, bi-annually, annually)

What will be the central focus of your group? Will it be based in learning concepts, spiritual practices, actions/ service engagement?

Name the commitment level this group requires. Consider the goal of the group, the availability of members, the content you are studying etc.

What is the focus of your group?

What are group norms you would like to establish?

What are the expectations of the group members?

What mechanisms can be in place for members to give feedback about the group or their experience within the group?

Given the members in your group, what could be implicit bias which could impact the group or impact who could feel welcome or unwelcome?

What might be a mechanism through which the group might become more self aware of who would feel on the fringe in your group because of their background, stage, identity, or demographics?

Is your group needing to take a break or re-evaluate your purpose/ expectations/ goals? If not, can your group name flags that might help identify when that time would be?

RESOURCES

- [SelfCheck-n \(Head, heart, gut\)](#)
- Optional Reading: [Making Small Groups Work](#). This book is a great reference resource to have quick tips on hand for how to set expectations, create shared responsibility, address conflict, and more.
- Optional Reading: [Leading Small Groups](#) by Chris Surratt
- Highrock Training: [Leader Resource Videos](#) (Connection Kickstarter series)
- [Resource Library](#): Find links for spiritual growth, practices, parenting, marriage, mental health starting points and more.