

How to Lead with Authenticity

Authenticity is the hallmark of a successful small group. When authenticity is at a group's core, the result is a healthy community will grow as people feel trust and acceptance. They can express themselves freely without judgment. In this environment, real relationships and spiritual growth flourishes.

So, how do you build authenticity in your small group? A good place to start is by recognizing common barriers to transparency. Doing so will reveal ways to model this core value to your group in ways that foster true community.

Identify the Barriers to Authenticity

As a group leader, you have a profound impact on how transparent your group members will be just by knowing how to spot and overcome barriers to authenticity. Be on the lookout for these enemies of authenticity:

- **Building walls of self-protection instead of transparency.** For most people, letting down their guard in a group can be uncomfortable, especially when there are a lot of unfamiliar faces. Instead of presenting their "real" selves (with faults, failures and flaws), members may wear masks to disguise their true thoughts or feelings. If this is allowed to continue for too long, an unhealthy, superficial group dynamic develops, inhibiting trust and true relationships to form.

Be aware that at one point or another, we've all used this natural protective mechanism to guard against being hurt or judged. Demonstrate your own transparency by taking off your own mask -- e.g., being the first one to share your feelings in a discussion or admit your failures. In doing so, you will show group members that it's safe to take off their masks and be real.

- **Not giving enough time for community to develop naturally.** Trust and comfort develop over time. If your group is fairly new, or if you've added new group members, avoid pushing members to go deep before they are ready. Trying to force an environment of self-revelation too soon may inhibit your group's natural process of building authenticity. Always start slow, gauging your member's responses and interactions with each other before moving into deeper discussions.
- **Poor listening.** People are less likely to talk openly about their feelings or experiences when they fear judgment or rejection from others in the group. Often, this expectation is unintentionally communicated when the group leader and/or group members don't demonstrate active listening. An example of this is when one person is sharing, others are thinking about their response, critiquing what is being said, or planning how to give the right advice. If members feel they are not being listened to, sharing becomes less truthful. You can encourage members to do active listening with each other by asking them to focus on the person sharing and to hold their thoughts and comments until the appropriate time.

How Model Authenticity

As a group leader, you can build authenticity in your group by modeling what being "real" looks like. When you're the first one to share honest thoughts, struggles, feelings, or hurts, you pave the way for group members to do the same.

Here's how to begin:

- **Be ready to share first when you ask a personal question.** Your transparency creates a "safe" environment for others to share. When preparing your questions, think through your responses ahead of time so that you'll be able to take more risks.
- **Communicate truth and your personal response to it.** When you are teaching a biblical principle, it's also helpful to share how this principle has played out your own life. Have the courage to share honestly about your successes and challenges in living out these principles. Your authenticity and humility will invite others to participate on a whole new level.
- **Acknowledge your mistakes.** Everyone makes mistakes and we're all human. If you make a mistake and beat yourself up in front of the group, this will only demonstrate to others that it won't be safe if they make a mistake. Instead, acknowledge your mistake openly and maintain a positive attitude.
- **Demonstrate forgiveness.** Harboring unforgiveness and grudges will only create barriers in relationships. As a group leader, be honest about your own relational journey. What have you done right? When have you blown it? What have you learned along the way? This shows your grace and humility, and that you're human too.