

Facilitators of Small (Table) Groups

As young people progress through the socialization stage of junior high and high school, they become very self-conscious. They are concerned about how they look, how they sound, what they say and are concerned about not fitting in with their peers. Freshman year in high school they are extremely fragile and will do just about anything to be accepted by their classmates and the upper classmen.

By their sophomore/junior year in high school, few, especially males, will still “volunteer” to answer questions or respond to adults in a large group setting. As a result of the internet/cell phones, their social skills have declined, and they become even more introverted towards adults.

The best way to engage young people at this time in their life is through small groups. Five to seven young people with an adult facilitator at a round table is the best way to do this. The adult should be a person who is good at engaging others as opposed to someone who wants to talk and is uncomfortable when there seems to be a “quiet” time in conversations.

The best table facilitators are usually people in the pews around you. People you know. A Nurse, Housewife, Public Relations Executive, Teacher, Retirement Counselor, Financial Consultant, Secretary, Carpenter, Plumber, Accountant. People who are friendly, accessible, provide a good example, a good listener, good sense of humor, self-confident, patient, positive with and interested in young people, and a practicing Catholic. The first couple years you may have to recruit “parents” of candidates but hopefully, you can recruit the effective ones to continue after their children have left the program.

One of our best table facilitators is a former truck driver/carpenter who is quiet and a great listener and talks slow and thoughtfully. He makes eye contact with each of the young people at his table and engages them in a conversation. He will let them “pass” if they don’t have anything to say, but will come back to them after the others have responded. All of his students know they are expected to respond and as a result, they do. He doesn’t interrupt them, he doesn’t argue with them. If they say something he doesn’t agree with, he asks the table if they agree or disagree with the comment. He then calls on each of them to say “Why they think that way.” He then asks them questions after they share what they think....trying to understand their thinking on the subject/issue. If he gets a question, he will ask the entire group to respond first, then he responds. If he doesn’t have an answer, he will ask the person asking the question to see what they can find out and he will too and they can talk more about it next time. He has even given them permission to use their phone to google for an answer while the table moves on to the next questions/discussion point. By the third session, the students are asking him “What he thinks?” after he asks them. And, they listen when he tells them!

One of my worst table facilitators was a good friend and great guy in our parish. He was a 4th Degree Knight, Choir, Lector, a full-time volunteer if ever there was one. By the third session, I noticed he was the only one talking at his table. The students sat glassy eyed looking at him as he answered the discussion questions and talked at great lengths about the Gospel, the Church and everything he was doing. John is still a good friend and he still is a sub but I will not give him a table again. He even admitted he couldn’t stop talking. He was so uncomfortable with the “quiet” at the table when he would ask a question.