



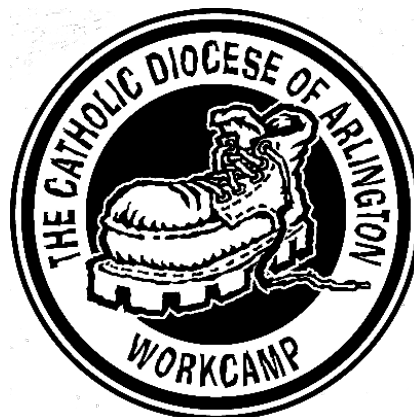
# CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ARLINGTON

## Small Group Discussion Manual

### WorkCamp Adult Crew Leaders

#### Table of Contents

Introduction .....	2
The Purpose of Small Groups .....	2
Facilitate deeper discussion about program content. ....	2
Provide a trustworthy environment for honest self-examination.....	2
Build community and relationships between members.....	3
Small Group Leadership .....	3
Setting Expectations .....	4
Establishing the Group Culture .....	5
Facilitate & Moderate .....	6
Conclusion .....	10
Appendix.....	11
Example script for setting up expectations for a WorkCamp Crew discussion. ....	11



# Introduction

Small group discussions are a centerpiece of WorkCamp and youth ministry programming, and it is critical that those responsible for facilitating these discussions are properly equipped to do so. This manual will provide you, the Adult Crew Leader (ACL), with a general overview of the purpose of small groups and best practices for achieving fruitful conversations that yield practical, life-changing results.

## The Purpose of Small Groups

The primary objectives of small group discussions at WorkCamp are to facilitate an encounter with Jesus through deeper discussion about program content, honest self-examination in a trustworthy environment, and relationship building between participants.

### **Facilitate deeper discussion about program content.**

Small group time at WorkCamp consists of daily devotionals in the morning, lunch time, and as you are leaving the worksite. There will also be parish discussion questions each evening after program. It is critical that Adult Crew Leaders are active listeners and participants in WorkCamp programming, both for the sake of your own understanding and to set a positive example of engagement for youth. Consider taking quick, brief notes when the speaker says something that strikes you or seems especially relevant to any of the devotional questions you will be provided with ahead of time. It is helpful to be aware of the daily theme for each day listed in your *ACL Discussion and Devotional Packet*. The theme is weaved into all aspects of the day from the devotionals, to the messaging at program, through the prompts for parish discussion.

Though this purpose may seem self-evident, it can be a temptation for Adult Crew Leaders to turn the forum into a “second talk”, lecturing opinions and wisdom *at* teens instead of generating discussion amongst them. *Your job is to facilitate and moderate crew conversation, not provide additional content!*

### **Provide a trustworthy environment for honest self-examination.**

Quality content alone does not guarantee an engaged dialogue, as many participants have barriers of trust and self-consciousness to overcome. It is critical that you create a loving environment where it is understood that participants can speak freely with an expectation of confidentiality, where thoughts that are expressed may be pushed further through deeper

questioning but will not be met with condemnation or harsh rebuke. Small groups discussion must allow for the expression of messy streams of thought to be effective spaces for self-reflection and growth, and a shared understanding of the expectations of confidentiality from the ACL(s) and teens are vital before the discussions can begin.

Confidentiality means that Adult Crew Leaders and crew members will not share conversations from the crew with people who were not part of it. However, there are some things that confidentiality does *not* cover, and Adult Crew Leader(s) must be transparent about these issues:

1. All youth workers (including volunteers) are mandatory reporters. If you learn something about a minor which may be considered abuse or neglect, then you are a mandatory reporter to contact social services. You must notify them within 24 hours of learning the information. The Parish Stakeholder should also be informed so that they can take the appropriate action of who else needs to be notified.
2. You can never promise confidentiality from their parents. You can promise that if you learn anything about a person that is worrisome, you will always respond 100% in care for what is best for them.

*If you suspect that someone is about to overstep appropriate boundaries of sharing, follow the action steps listed later in this booklet under the subsection “**Moderate boundaries of appropriate sharing**”.*

## **Build community and relationships between members.**

The service and social nature of WorkCamp crews creates opportunities for relational connection and community building. It is common for self-conscious participants to open up after seeing that the thoughts or struggles they have are not unique to them. You may even see your crew remains connected for future accountability and support long after WorkCamp’s conclusion!

## **Small Group Leadership**

The primary functions of the ACL during devotional discussion times are to set expectations, establish the “crew” culture, and facilitate and moderate the conversation. You will find these roles broken down further below, as well as how to respond to common challenging situations you will likely face at some point during the week. The list of crew expectations below is a baseline list that is helpful to communicate before you begin.

## Setting Expectations

In general, it is good for ACLs to communicate the expectations of sharing during devotionals before kicking off the first conversation (and re-iterate as needed throughout).

### **Rule #1: “Cold Calling”**

Let your crew know that you may ask participants for their thoughts and feelings to make sure everyone has a chance to participate and engage. By “cold calling” on participants, you 1) check for a deeper understanding of the content from participants other than those eager to answer, 2) create a culture of accountable engagement, and 3) give yourself a pacing tool that allows you to push the conversation forward. This does not mean that you must always push the conversation forward – it is often appropriate to give your crew comfortable and respectful time for contemplative silence to process initial thoughts prior to sharing.

This practice can be extremely helpful *when administered appropriately*. For this kind of “cold calling” to be effective, it must be *predictable* and *affirming*. It is NOT a “gotcha” tool for disengaged teens; it is a transparent means of keeping teens engaged and involved. Make sure you communicate this to your crew ahead of time and follow through consistently and appropriately.

### **Rule #2: Speak for Oneself**

Requiring speaking in the first person is an effective way to improve the reflection within your crew by changing the language teens use to express themselves. Consider the following examples:

*“Society pressures young women into unrealistic standards of beauty.”*

*“It’s really easy for you to feel like you’re not good enough.”*

*“I wake up every day feeling like I will never be pretty enough.”*

There is a clear progression as each statement becomes more personally meaningful simply by shifting the language and perspective. The first statement is a criticism of culture that does not actually tell us how it impacts the speaker. The second statement is more personal, but it keeps the issue at arm’s length. It is in the third statement that we finally see how the participant truly feels.

This “expectation” may surprise your participants with how difficult it is to implement. (The second statement in the second-person point of view is the default mode of expression for many). Expect to see their comfort zone challenged when they have to say, “I feel...” instead of “You might feel like...”. This is a rule worth implementing early and reinforcing often in your small group interactions. Use your best judgment as to when is appropriate to kindly, quickly, and tactfully interrupt a speaker to remind them of the rule, and when to let a stream of consciousness flow.

### **Rule #3: Give Feedback, Not Advice**

Effective dialogue from you and amongst participants ought to take the form of feedback, not advice. This feedback should encourage and challenge other participants to go deeper on their own.

Be aware to not let group turn into a council of problem solvers and critics, risking participants becoming dependent on the advice of others and failing to grow and individuate themselves. It can also lead to unwise, overreaching advice sending someone into a worse situation than before and shattering trust in the small group sharing and support alliance.

Effective feedback points out inconsistencies between beliefs and behaviors. Small groups can be extremely effective at vetting attempts at rationalization and tactfully calling it out. Consider this example of a high school boy sharing about how he feels like he has to “put on a face” around his new girlfriend and her friend group, saying and doing things he would not otherwise. He may attempt to rationalize this behavior (e.g. “I’m trying to get in with the group so I can evangelize them”) until group feedback points out the inconsistencies between his goals (virtuous living) and his behavior. This approach empowers him toward freely chosen personal growth, done by him, for his own sake.

## **Establishing the Group Culture**

Adult Crew Leaders are living testimonies to the joys of being Catholic. The bearing with which you present yourself, how you demonstrate patience and compassion through active listening and the ways you encourage their growth with care all contribute to the culture of your group.

## **A Culture of Joy**

Self-reflection and vulnerable discussion can be painful - but you have the power to demonstrate the process as a short-term means to an end of joy and freedom! Regular, affirming comments can go a long way in easing participants into the sharing process (though be careful not to overdo it and thank every single person for everything that is shared). Affirmations do not necessarily have to be thanking participants for sharing; simply affirming that their feelings are valid (e.g., *“That sounds like that would have been very hard for you”*) will also inspire further confidence and comfort. Opening each discussion in prayer will also allow you to take a pause and center yourself in the infectious peace and joy of God.

## **A Culture of Honesty**

A crew discussion that fosters an environment of honesty can spend less time hunting for contributions and more time discussing them. A common pitfall for ACLs is feeling the need to be an aggressive apologist for the Church when participants express views, frustrations, or disagreements that run contrary to Church teachings. But this does not have to be so; effective ACLs validate feelings without necessarily validating opinions.

Affirming sharing through further questioning (but not interrogation!) can continue to demonstrate your belief in them. Questions like, “What is that like for you?” help participants dig deeper and understand or express themselves more fully. It is not the appropriate duty of the ACL to attempt to fully internalize and *understand* all the emotions of all their crew; rather, it is simply *believing* them that is sufficient and often more authentic.

It is more important in a small group setting that you listen and sympathize before you attempt to catechize. Effective small group leaders use catechetical correction sparingly and quickly to clear up any glaring misunderstandings, then resume the small group without allowing it to devolve into debate or argument.

## **Facilitate & Moderate**

Once the formalities of setting up the crew discussion have concluded and the conversations have begun, your primary role shifts to that of a referee. Here are some key foundational guidelines to keep your groups on track and get the most from each session:

## Speak often, but briefly

ACLs should speak often, but briefly. Appropriate small group intervention often takes the form of the following:

1. Building bridges and connections between participants *“You know Sarah, I feel like that’s very similar to what Jess said a few minutes ago.”*
2. Watching participants’ body language and, without applying undue pressure or shame, asking them to express their thoughts or reaction to the group. Youth may be better served by not calling outward attention to the body language you’ve observed, given the burden of self-consciousness they already carry about their appearance, behaviors, and quirks.
3. Helping a participant articulate a thought by putting the idea into words and asking, “Does this sound right?” Be careful to not insert yourself uninvited too quickly into their thought processing, and always *ask* if they could mean to be saying something else – never put words in their mouth. *“Tell me if I understand this correctly – it sounds like what’s bothering you the most is that the Church is supposed to be a beacon of truth and joy, but the Christians at your school have been toxic toward you, and the contradiction has made you doubt how the Church could have the truth if the people are so nasty. Do I have that right?”*
4. Affirmations, especially for participants who seem anxious about sharing. *“I appreciate you opening up about that – that must have been a tough thing to share”.*
5. When applicable, it may be appropriate for the ACL to close out unfinished business from previous crew discussions. At WorkCamp, a powerful or intense small group session may be cut short, and it may be worth it to revisit for closure. *“At the end of our last discussion, we ran out of time as Kristen and Annie were sharing some deep feelings – would you like to continue that conversation?”*

## Engage the group amongst itself

One of the surest ways to judge the health of a small group is to see if participants are engaging one another directly or if the conversation is a disjointed series of one-on-one interactions with the ACL. Tempting as it may be to be the font of everlasting wisdom from which your participants line up to get their fill, your duty as the ACL is to create a free-flowing conversational environment between crew members with you only stepping in as needed. Think of a family tossing a frisbee around at a picnic, where it flies freely from one person to another.

## **Moderate boundaries of appropriate sharing**

Sometimes content being discussed will lead to sharing that hits viscerally close to home for some of your participants. You are not equipped nor expected to take on the role of a therapist (and even if you are, it is inappropriate to act in that capacity in a crew setting). Though crew interactions can mirror certain aspects of group therapy environments in that they promote personal and spiritual growth through collaborative sharing, discussion, and community building, they are not appropriate platforms for working through severe traumas.

As the moderator, you will need to redirect the conversation if it ever turns towards issues that would (or you think could) trigger mandatory reporting (e.g., thoughts of harming oneself or others) or if a participant begins oversharing and divulging issues related to presently unresolved traumas (e.g., past abuse, substance abuse) or other issues that would require the aid of professional counseling. (A participant that says, “I am struggling with depression and anxiety” is appropriate – a participant that changes the topic of discussion to their anxiety and depression is not).

If you find yourself in a situation where you must assert your authority as the ACL to pause the speaker and bring the conversation back in-bounds, follow these steps:

1. Affirm the speaker for their willingness to share and be vulnerable.
2. Let the participant know that their topic is outside the scope of the crew discussion, and if possible, let them know that you can or will follow up with them immediately after.
3. Inform your Stakeholder of what was shared in case further action must be taken.

## **Participant Challenges: “The Chatty Kathy”**

When one of your participants takes up an inordinate amount of group time sharing, it is likely the result of one of the following:

1. They do not have a firm understanding of the purpose and expectations of a small group discussion. A teen may hoard the spotlight by trying to process out loud without seeking feedback or input from others, as if they are answering to a teacher and not engaging in conversation. (A tattletale signal this may be happening is if you have participants that only look at and engage you when they speak, and not the group at large). It may be helpful to reiterate the purpose of small groups with the whole crew, especially if there is rampant “quiet complicity” with the situation to dodge participation.



2. They are seeking validation from the crew or the ACL. Affirm the speaker enough to show them you care, then redirect the conversation elsewhere to demonstrate that they are not the center of the group.

3. Perpetual filibustering is their way of coping with the emotional stress of the topic or sharing in general. In this case, interrupting their monologue and affirming them for sharing may come as a great relief!

## **Participant Challenges: “The Sound of Silence”**

Participants who do not engage in the group conversation are communicating a message to you just as meaningful as ones who are. Silence, discomfort, and body language must be read and understood, as it can provide critical clues that the participant may struggle to connect with their inner self or with others. Younger teens can be especially prone to defiance or feigning disinterest as a coping mechanism.

Remember that silence is only as awkward as you allow it to be.. If you are comfortable allowing for deeper reflection and pause in silence, your crew will adapt quickly.

Use times in silence to observe your crew and their body language, since silence typically means one of the following:

1. Participants are processing the content / question.
2. Participants do not understand the question (and everyone is too afraid to ask!).
3. The material is sensitive, and everyone is waiting for someone else to share first.
4. Participants who speak English as a second language may require more time for inner translation, especially if the topic is very emotionally charged.

If you need to break the silence to move the crew forward, you can always ask your group if they need more time to think or if you need to repeat or rephrase the question. You will quickly intuit when your crew is processing deeply, versus when they don't understand your question (but are too afraid to ask!).

## **Tips for Co-Leadership**

Sometimes you may have a Co-Adult Crew Leader. Co-leadership is not radically different from solo leadership, but you will want to mindfully manage the dynamics of co-leadership. When properly leveraged, these dynamics can provide benefits that will strongly enhance your crews experience:

Co-leaders are equal in authority, unequal in everything else. You and your co-leader must be a united front – but you are likely vastly different people with unique personalities, talents, life experiences, etc. These differences offer more opportunities for your crew(s) to connect with you.

Emulate the behavior you want to see from your group. Effective co-ACL must model the communication and joy between each other that they want to foster in their crew(s). This means demonstrating healthy, kind, and regular open communication between each other.

Alternate opening & closing sessions. This will help reinforce that you are a team of equals and not senior/subordinate.

Discuss your crew outside of sessions. During the day on site, you should touch base with your co-ACL and discuss any notable group interactions or discussions. They may have picked up on things that you did not (and vice-versa).

## **Conclusion**

It would be more accurate to describe small group leadership as a set of skills rather than a single skill. This set of skills can be improved upon over a lifetime without ever achieving total, complete, and perfect mastery of the craft. Be patient with yourself as you discover your style, your strengths, and your points of improvement.

Thank you for taking on the role of the small group leader! We hope this booklet has provided you with an initial foundation to begin your small group leadership or given you new techniques to take back into your groups and parishes.

## Appendix

### **Example script for setting up expectations for a WorkCamp Crew discussion.**

Feel free to put this into your own words!

*“Before we get started, I want to run through the goals of our crew discussion time and why we’re doing what we’re doing. The goal of crew devotionals is to get conversations going about what we hear throughout this week – I want to hear about what you guys are thinking, I’m not here to lecture you! Our small group is a condemnation free zone. I want you guys to start thinking about the other people in the group like allies and teammates working together to make each other better. As the saying goes, “iron sharpens iron”, and the more engaged you guys are with each other in this, the more you’ll get from it. Before we start, I need to lay out our expectations for how this group is going to work:*

*First, it’s my job as the Adult Crew Leader to make sure everyone has a chance to participate and share, which means I may ask people to share if they haven’t been able to yet. This isn’t a “gotcha” tool like a teacher that goes out of their way to call on someone falling asleep in class – it helps me make sure everyone is able to contribute, and it helps keep everyone engaged and the group moving forward. That being said, I want to give you all the time and space to think and process, so you can expect some quiet time throughout for you to think where I’m not going to pick on someone for an immediate answer. Silence is okay!*

*Second, we have a rule to “speak for oneself”. That is, we share our thoughts without assuming anyone else’s or speaking for them. We’re also going to speak in the first person using “I think...” and not “you think” or “some people think”. This one might take a little practice to get down, and that’s okay! I think you’ll be surprised at how much a focus on your language and perspective will help you dig deeper into processing the talks and sharing your thoughts.*

*Lastly, if you would like to comment on what someone else has shared, we give each other feedback, not advice. Good feedback could be affirming something tough they’ve shared, asking a question to help them dig deeper (without being accusatory), or responding to something someone said with your own thoughts and feelings. Telling someone what they should do or how they should feel can take away from their own processing and make them feel unheard.*

*Does anyone have any questions about the small group or any of the rules?*

*Awesome! Let’s go ahead and kick things off with a prayer and then we’ll get started. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit...”*