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Running Meetings

As discussed in the Leadership section, leadership of a book group can be quite a responsibility. The leader is generally in charge of not only choosing the book to be discussed, but also moderating and directing the discussion itself, providing some background information on the book and author, and dealing with any problems that may arise during the discussion. Some groups get around this by hiring a professional, but if your group has gone the member-led route and is looking for some direction, we've compiled some tips for you on all the details involved in running your discussion.

BEFORE the Meeting

First of all, take a cue from the Boy Scouts and **be prepared**. If there are discussion questions available for your book from one of the many sources we?ve compiled here, the leader or discussion moderator should print those out and go over them, perhaps adding a few questions or taking notes on areas he or she particularly wants to focus on in the discussion. If there aren?t prepared questions available, the leader will need to write them, using generic questions as a base. At least 8 to 12 opinion- or interpretation-based questions (**not** yes-or-no questions) are essential to provide enough structure and direction for a successful discussion. Good generic questions are readily available on some of the online resources linked to above.

In addition to finding or creating book discussion questions, the leader should consider reading up on the background of the author and/or getting a little more information on the time period or setting of the book, if that would be helpful. This information can often be found in the Library's online databases. (You will need a valid Highland Park Library card number to log into these resouces.)

DURING the Meeting

Be supportive, be flexible, be a good listener!

The leader/moderator should:

1. Break the ice and make sure all members know each others? names

2. Make sure every member gets to speak at least once. A suggestion is to begin the meeting by going around the room and asking everyone for their initial thoughts about the book. This serves as both an ice-breaker and as a good way to bring up a lot of discussion points and opinions to pursue.

3. Keep the discussion on track. Socializing is fine to a limited degree, but needs to be kept to a minimum during the discussion itself.

4. Make certain discussion goes beyond simple ?I liked it/didn?t like it? statements. Draw people out with leading questions. The motivations behind strongly-held opinions can form the basis of interesting discussions.

5. Provide some direction to the discussion, but allow it to flow naturally into areas the members seem to find most interesting. Don?t feel compelled to stick to a pre-defined list of questions; if question 5 captivates the group?s attention, don?t stress too much about whether or not you get to questions 6, 7, and 8.

6. Encourage constructive disagreement rather than conflict. Don?t strive for complete consensus; everyone's thoughts and opinions are equally valid!

7. Make sure the discussion is well-balanced among participants. No one should dominate, and no one should feel left out.

Dealing with "Problem" Members or Difficult Discussions

The most common problems a group is likely to encounter during discussion are reticence and verbosity. You may have one or more members who barely if ever speak, and one or more members who do nothing but, even going so far as to interrupt other members!

Shy or Quiet Members

First determine whether the member's silence really is a problem. Some people prefer to listen and only speak when they have a well-considered point to make. Not speaking very often is not necessarily a problem, as long as they are still contributing to the discussion in some way. If, however, you truly have someone who never says anything, or seems uncomfortable about speaking up, you may need to find ways to draw them out. Consider making a point to chat with them one-on-one before the discussion begins, perhaps even ask them their thoughts about the book. This will help put them at their ease. In addition, you can then refer back to a point

they?ve made to you but may not have expressed to the group. ?Oh, Sarah made a good point when we were chatting earlier?Sarah, why don?t you tell everyone else what you told me?? Also, if you don?t think it would make them too uncomfortable, you can always use the simple expedient of directly asking the quiet members their thoughts on the points currently being discussed.

Too-Talkative or Dominating Members

If you encounter someone who dominates the conversation, interrupts others, or even tends to be dismissive or critical of others? opinions in favor of her own, it may be a more important problem to address than a quiet member. A group member who behaves this way may make other members uncomfortable or even angry, and this can lead to tension among members if the problem is not addressed.

During the discussion, find ways to redirect conversation away from the too-talkative member. If the member has interrupted someone, remember who and what that person was saying, then go back to that person?s point as soon as you can, making a point to address the interrupted person by name and asking her to expand upon what she?d already said. If the too-talkative member simply goes on for too long about any given point, interject at the first polite opportunity to do so and, while validating her opinions, redirect by asking a question of the group. ?Jessica?s made some great points! Group, what do you think about what Jessica said about Y? Do you agree?? If the too-talkative member is dismissive or critical of what others have to say, gently point out that while her opinion is certainly valid, others? opinions are as well and that it is okay to disagree. Then redirect, either by asking someone else?s opinion of what is being discussed or asking a new question altogether.

If the inappropriate behavior continues, someone may need to take the problem-causing member aside and explain to her how her actions are making the other group members feel and ask her to tone it down a bit.

Another option that might help with both the too-talkative and the too-quiet member is to institute a ?talking stick? policy. Choose some object to pass around the group. Only the member currently holding the object may speak, and the leader will determine who is next in line for the talking stick. This has worked well in some groups to formalize the speaking process and make certain that everyone gets equal input into the discussion.

And don?t forget?you can always use the two type of problem members against one another! Enlist the talkative one to help you draw out the quiet one, and enlist the quiet one to help you balance out the talkative one! Sneaky, but effective!

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