

5 Steps to Get to Know Your Group Members

The elements of story can help you uncover important details about the people in your group.
Jon Noto

It takes more than listening well and asking good questions to make a great small-group leader. Great small-group leaders seek to understand their group members. They want to know what makes each person tick. They are fully aware that discipleship requires a deeper level of connection than average relationships. In discipleship relationships, we need more than the CliffsNotes on our group members—we need a deep understanding of who they are. Instead, we must think of every person in our group as people with full stories, and we can approach getting to know them like getting to know a good book.

Just like a story, each of us is a mix of important factors. They interact to give depth and development to our lives. If you're like me, you learned the five elements of a story in middle school: setting, characters, plot, conflict, and theme. These are fantastic lenses through which we can understand the members of our group.

Think through the following five story elements for each person in your group and consider: What can I learn about him or her? How can I better lead them and serve him or her?

Setting

Where has this person lived? What is his or her heritage?

My first time volunteering in the church was to help lead a small group of middle-school boys. The director, knowing I was brand-new, paired me with the ministry's most experienced leader. I got to tag along and learn. Over time, this leader asked me to contribute, but it didn't always go smoothly. This first time I was asked to pray at the end of one of our sessions, I said, "Dear God, thank you for this conversation, and help us to do your will as a result. Goodbye."

Goodbye? Who says that at the end of a prayer? All the boys giggled. I laughed it off, but I wondered what they and the more experienced leader thought of my mistake. It's dangerously easy to make some assumptions in those moments, especially when we don't know the person's background.

If they had known my story they would know the church setting in which I grew up. I was very experienced in prayer, but they were memorized or read out loud. I had never been in a situation where I needed to pray out loud, coming up with the words on my own. Without seeing my prayer through the lens of my history, it could have been seen as a lack of a personal prayer life.

Do you fully understand the pasts of your group members? Do you know where they come from, their heritage, and their family life growing up? These are important factors in understanding them today.

Characters

Who has influenced this person's life? Who matters to him or her?

There are no great stories without great characters. Stories center on people because people matter to us. They are a major influence on our lives and can often be turning points in a story.

How tiresome would it be to have Abbott without Costello? Without Jack and Rose, The Titanic would shift from being a love story to a survival movie. If The Office focused only on Jim and never introduced the other characters it would be a show about selling paper. Stories without characters become incredibly dry, or vanish altogether.

The same is true if you look at an individual's life through the lens of story. Consider the narrative of Jacob's life in the book of Genesis. The writer spends an entire chapter just on Jacob's preparation to reunite with Esau. If you didn't know the history of these two brothers this would be confusing. Knowing their relationship, it becomes quite clear what Jacob means in his prayer in Genesis 32:11: "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children."

Do you have a sense of the people who played major roles in your group members' lives? As the old adage says, "A person is known by the company he (or she!) keeps."

Plot

What main events have occurred that have shaped this person? What are the major high points and low points of his or her life?

My favorite tool to kick off small-group meetings is an exercise called, Peaks and Valleys. Group members draw a horizontal timeline across a piece of paper. On the left is the year of their birth. On the right is the present year. Each person then draws a line from left to right that fluctuates above and below the timeline like an EKG report. Anything above the line is something good or positive, and anything below is something painful or negatively impactful. The farther up or down the line is drawn, the more impactful the event was. If you got married in a certain year, for instance, your line might go quite a bit higher than your baseline. If a relative passed away, your line would undoubtedly drop bit at that year.

What you end up with is a graphical representation of the plot of each group member's life. Amazing revelations undoubtedly occur as you learn how major events have shaped each person in the room.

A close friend of mine recently described a struggle he and his wife were having. They found it difficult to understand why God appears to be silent at times, even in the midst of tragedy or great need. During our conversation, he revealed that his wife was diagnosed with cancer 6 years ago when she was in her 20's. They almost didn't have kids as a result. I asked him a number of follow-up questions, because I realized experiences that happened during that trial were directly linked to the challenge they were encountering today. Without knowing that critically important plot point in their story, I would only have been able to minister at a superficial level. Instead, we were able to talk about his walk with God in light of it and make some real progress.

Do you know your group members' peaks and valleys? Do they know yours?

Conflict

What major problems has this person encountered? What big challenges is he or she facing right now?

Imagine you're on a sailboat in Lake Michigan, just off the coast of Chicago. The skyline is in view as you enjoy the brisk spring air. Suddenly, you notice something in your periphery. There's someone in the water! You adjust your course and head for the person in need. The person is shouting, "Help! I'm drowning!"

It would be totally inappropriate to shout back: "It's okay! I'm a fantastic swimming instructor! I'll teach you to swim right now so you can swim to shore!"

Some of the members of our group could be in this situation. They may have a failing marriage that is failing, have recently experienced a job loss, or are dealing with a scary health diagnosis. As leaders, we must be sensitive to these conflicts and challenges. God wants to meet his children in their distress and need, and we can be his hands and feet. Knowing the conflicts (past and present) of your group members is an opportunity to minister to them more effectively.

What major conflicts have your group members dealt with? What are they currently dealing with?

Theme

What major lessons or principles has this person lived by or discovered?

Few people walk around being able to identify the major themes of their life. It is only after much reflection and prayer that we are able to recognize major themes than run through our experiences. Part of that is because we seldom stop to speak into one another in this important way.

Not long ago, I was asked to officiate a funeral for my friend's father. He was the oldest male in the family, and I was blown away by what was said about him. Every child and grandchild that came forward mentioned the same thing: He served his family in love. Surely, he had many other traits—good and bad—but this one thing is what he would be remembered for.

I love helping my group members consider the themes of their lives. Conversations about theme are intimate, however, and require a high level of trust. After your group has covered some ground, and is comfortable sharing vulnerably, ask these important questions about theme:

What is the one lesson God keeps reminding you of?

What is the legacy you want to leave behind?

What one value do you want to pass on to your children?

If you could finish one thing by the end of your life, what would it be?

These are future-oriented questions, but the answers only make sense in light of the past. Bryan Loritts once said, "Often our greatest passion is birthed out of our greatest pain." If something is strong enough to be a theme of your life in your future then there is already evidence of it being a theme in your present.

—Jon Noto is a community life pastor and licensed clinical counselor at Willow Creek Community Church's North Shore campus.