

Why Small Group Leaders Need To Be “OCD”

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BCC Staff Note: You're reading the third of a three-part BCC *Grace & Truth* blog mini-series on small group ministry and biblical counseling. You can read Part One, [Transformational Small Group Ministry and Biblical Counseling](#) by Ken Long, and Part Two, [From Benevolence to Small Groups](#) by Brad Hambrick.

Three Words for a Shepherd

If you knew me well you would know that I do not fancy psychiatric labels as a rule. They say too much about behavior and not about the heart. They have the danger of speaking into identity for people that do not have a solid anchor in Christ.

So when we say “OCD,” it's just a play on words. It is not about struggling with obsessive thoughts or compulsive behavior. Our use of “OCD” here is different; it is an acronym for three words that describe a shepherd, “observant, clarifying and discerning.” Proverbs 27:23 states that we should know our flocks well. A good small group leader who is a first responder in soul care is: a careful *observer*, he or she seeks *clarity*, and practices spiritual *discernment*. All three qualities make up godly assessment which helps us to avoid presumption and develop the best way to care for our people.

Being *Observant*

Observant people make for good small group leaders. They watch and listen. They look for signs of inconsistency between verbal and non-verbal behavior. They watch how people interact, where they sit, and body language during discussion. They notice when someone seems out of character or different in demeanor. They listen for tone, cadence, and content in verbal interaction.

Imagine Dan is in your small group and he seems irritable. He is curt with his responses, huffs under his breath, and rolls his eyes when someone asks him what is wrong. When you ask him if he is upset about something, he raises his voice and narrows his eyes exclaiming, “I am not angry.”

Being the amazing small group leader you are, you deduct that is likely not true and ask him to hang out and talk after small group so you can talk more. At first, the skills needed for careful observation need to be learned and deliberately practiced but over time it is almost intuitive.

Seeking Clarity

Asking clarifying questions may seem like an art form to many, but it can be learned. Good small group leaders ask great questions but they also listen to understand, not just to respond.

The trick here is to be truly compassionate and possess a godly curiosity to know your people well. If you think you already know, or you don't really care, people pick that up in your body language, tone, and response. Don't violate Proverbs 18:13 which states, “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.”

Let's go back to the example of our friend Dan. A good set of opening questions might be: “Dan, I know you to be intense sometimes, but tonight you seemed really irritated. I want to know how to pray for you and how to come alongside you. What is going on in your life right now that is burdening you?” Remember, a question pricks the conscience but an accusation hardens the heart.

Seeking further clarity would take you from asking about Dan's situation to questions about his thinking to questions

about his motives. Asking Dan what he is thinking about in the midst of his trial and what he wants most right now would draw out where his heart is.

Ultimately, a good small group leader would go from the fruit of irritation to some root issues that drive this apparent behavior. All that should lead to discerning what motivates Dan and where to go in Scripture to address the heart of the matter.

Spiritual Discernment

Spiritual discernment is a gift from God – no doubt. Yet, like being observant and asking good questions for clarity, spiritual discernment is something that can be cultivated over time (see Heb. 5:14). The Bible exhorts us to pray for discernment in the Spirit (see Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-10). We can see behavior, we can clarify thinking and correct faulty theology, but we should not read into motives or attitudes of the heart (see Prov. 20:5, Jer 17:9-10).

This is where God must reveal to us and them what is at the root of it all. When we observe, asking clarifying question and pray for discernment God often point us to very specific Scriptures that target the heart.

Discernment helps us expose idols that might be present. In Dan's case, it could be that he has an inordinate need to control and we might quickly conclude he has an anger problem. Anger was clearly the fruit we observed. He was irritable and defensive. However, as we probe more deeply, we might find out he is really fearful of losing his home because his work is downsizing.

He is also nervous about his reputation because he has lost some accounts and a younger salesman has passed him up at work. He is hopeful no one in the group will find out these things because he is not ready to deal with them personally or publically. Dan is irritable but what rules his heart? Is it envy or jealousy? Could it be fear of man driving the defensiveness and anger? A discerning person does not assume but prays and ask questions that reveal the heart. Now as we go to Scripture we will focus not only on Dan's anger but the fear that seems to be feeding it.

Whether we know it or not, struggles with anger, fear, despair, and foolishness are personal issues lurking right under the surface conversations of many small groups. A gifted small group leader helps others be authentic and get all this in the light.

In my experience, many leaders don't want to expose these things for fear that have no idea how to help. Please don't let that stop you! Helping is simply caring enough to comfort or confront, searching the Scriptures together for real answers, and praying for others as they "out their stuff" in a safe environment. Most of us can do that.

For Dan, the fact that someone took him aside without giving him platitudes or presumptively scolding him was a great start. As brothers and sisters we can bring comfort and conviction just by engaging in true fellowship. If it is really over our heads, we can get more help from those formally trained in giving biblical counsel but don't catapult people over that wall too quickly!

As you seek to be more "OCD," consider being part of the force to take back authentic fellowship in our small groups and in the church today. I define this type of fellowship as doing life together as you live out the one another commands in Scripture with joy. It is a powerful experience, based on active participation in a common interest and a commitment to living for Christ with one another. In that kind of group, the Dan's or Doris' of the world may get all the help they need. Fellowship like that is not happening in many places but it is the heart of "uncommon community".

Join the Conversation

So ask yourself, "Am I observant? Do I take time to clarify and listen to others? Am I praying and listening for discernment?"

Then, remember: if you care, if you are willing to search the Scriptures for answers, and if you don't just talk about prayer but actually pray with people, then YOU CAN be an effective small group leader and a catalyst for uncommon community to the glory of God.